



Hiding in Plain Sight by mcplestreet

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Summary: Her mother is dead. Her father's been captured. And now she's hiding in a hidden room in the closet and trying to ignore the way she feels when the Wheeler boy is around. Mileven 1940's AU
COMPLETE

1. Welcome to the Wheelers

Jane stared out the window of the car as it drove through the streets covered in rubble and debris. It was day 15 without her dad. She would never get the image of her next door neighbors sitting on her front steps with solemn expressions on their faces and the windows of her living room smashed in. *They took your dad, Jane. We're so sorry, Jane. We'll find somewhere for you to go. Thank god you were at a friend's house.*

It should have been her. But while he was alone and scared in a place where people like him were nothing but scum she was being shipped off to a family closer to the countryside. Her neighbor, Mrs. Donna, held onto her hand as her husband drove the car. It felt like they'd been driving for hours upon hours. But it had only been 3. While Jane had been staying at their house they told her she couldn't stay for long. A cousin of theirs was a Nazi. The longer she stayed the more danger she was in. Mrs. Donna wrote to everyone she knew asking if they had a room for a little girl who just lost her father. An old friend from high school, Karen Wheeler, had written back just as they started to lose hope.

"They have a son your age." Mrs. Donna said for the millionth time.

Jane's eyes remained glued out the window. Normally she wouldn't be caught dead in a dress. But Mrs. Donna said it was nice to make a first impression. So she, reluctantly, put on one of the nicer dresses she had from when she used to go to temple. She hadn't been in a few years. Thankfully she hadn't experienced much puberty for a 16 year old girl. The lace collar itched her neck and she worried the dress wouldn't be long enough to keep her covered when she stood up. Though she hadn't developed much she had still gotten taller.

The car pulled to a stop in front of a house three stories high in a neighborhood nicer than she had seen in a while. Sitting on a bench on the porch was a woman with blonde hair and a girl not too much older than herself with dark curly locks. Their conversation stopped short when their eyes landed on the car now parked in front of their house. Jane's stomach was performing a complex circus act inside her. She wanted to go back. No, she wanted her father. Though she

didn't know where he was, only that it wasn't nearly as nice as the house she sat in front of, she wished they were together. Instead she would be all by herself in a house full of strangers.

"Are you ready, Jane?" Mrs. Donna asked.

No.

"Yes."

Her fingers gripped the handle of her suitcase and she opened the car doors. The old sneakers she wore stood out against her dress and braided hair, but they were the only shoes she owned. "We have to look our best." She had been told earlier that morning as her hair was tied up. Was she being sent off into hiding or was she going to be married off to this boy her age?

Jane's insides squirmed with nervousness as she approached the mother and daughter. Behind them the house stared down at her and seemed to dare her to come inside. *Once you come in you'll never be able to come back out* it said. She wanted to yell back that she could do what she wanted but she knew better. Besides, it was right. It wasn't as if she could go to the corner store and get some milk. She was hiding.

"You must be Jane." The blonde woman said once she had reached them. "I'm Karen, and this is my daughter Nancy."

"Hello." She replied. Manners had never been Jane's forte. But without her father around to chastise her she had to be on her best behavior.

Nancy reached for her suitcase and slipped it from her grip. "I'll show you inside."

As she followed her inside she could hear the hushed voice of Mrs. Donna behind her. "She doesn't say much. Quiet young thing."

She wanted to point out that she was only standing a few feet away from her but thought better of it.

Jane tried her best not to stare once she was inside. But all the rooms

were so big and well decorated. She was sure her whole house could fit in the living room and dining room alone. As she followed Nancy up the stairs she wondered if she would be locked in her room all day or if she would be able to go around the house as she pleased. She told herself to not get her hopes up. The more she expected the more she opened herself up to being let down.

They went all the way up to the third floor, which was considerably smaller than the other two. Nancy opened the second door down the hall which revealed what looked like a nursery. Though by the boxes of miscellaneous items scattered around the room she guessed it wasn't in use anymore. Before Jane could wonder much about how she would fit in a crib Nancy made her way over to the closet and flipped on the light switch. Jane poked her head in just in time to see her push one of the walls back to reveal a small room with a bed and dresser. Though how they had managed to get in there was a mystery to her. "It's not much, but it's hidden and safe."

Jane stepped into the small room first. Nancy was right, it wasn't much at all. The wallpaper was old and faded and the floorboard creaked under her feet. Next to the bed was a circular window that couldn't have had a diameter more than one foot. The sheets and blankets on the bed didn't match. Other than that the room was empty.

"You'll only have to be in here at night and when there's no one home." Nancy said. She must have read something in Jane's face. "Mom doesn't work so you won't be alone much."

"Okay."

"And we can get you some more things. Like a mirror or a chair." She continued. "And you can always use some of my clothes if you didn't bring enough."

"Okay. Thanks."

Nancy shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "I can't imagine what this is like." She said. "Must be awful."

Jane wanted to agree. There was no way they could imagine what it

was like. Her and her father didn't even go to temple often. That is when they used to go. It was her mother that was the religious one, and she had been dead for years. Jane had no one now. No mother, no father, and the few friends she had made had all been taken away too. All she had were the things she had packed with her. Which, looking down at the suitcase now placed on her new bed, was depressing to say the least. But she couldn't say any of this. Even if she wasn't a quiet girl to begin with she also wasn't the type to dump her problems on others. So she replied with a simple "Yeah."

"Do you like to read?" Nancy asked. She was thankful for the subject change. "You can pick out a few books from the library and bring them up here if you'd like?"

The corners of her lips tugged up. Jane hadn't been able to smile fully since her dad had been taken away but she had come close. Hearing that she's still be able to read despite the fact that she didn't have the room to pack books threatened to break her straight faced streak. "That would be nice." She said.

Jane followed Nancy back out to the nursery and into the hallway. The floor creaked quieter than in the room but still loud enough to hear. Just as they got to the second floor she could hear a car door from outside. Jane wondered with a sinking feeling if her neighbors had left without saying goodbye. Had they been that eager to get rid of her?

"My dad's at work, he'll be home in a little bit." Nancy said as they walked. "Baby Holly's asleep. Mike, my little brother, is here somewhere. How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

She nodded. "He just turned seventeen a few weeks ago. He's kind of a weird kid."

Jan raised an eyebrow at her. "How so?"

"Well he doesn't have a lot of friends. And he's not big into sports. He's this skinny little thing. More into math and science." Nancy shrugged. "I don't know, he's just weird."

Jane's lips threatened to smile but she forced her face to stay straight. "He sounds like me."

Nancy smiled for her. "Maybe you two will get along."

Once they reached the end of the hall Nancy opened up a set of double doors. Jane had to clench her jaw to keep it from hanging open as she stepped into a library that was bigger than her bedroom at home. Shelves that reached the ceiling lined the walls and were covered in books. In the middle of the room on top of an area rug were two comfortable looking chairs. The only spot that didn't have a shelf was a large window almost twice as tall as she was with a sitting ledge underneath it. She wandered over to the nearest shelf and let her eyes wander over what looked like every Shakespeare play ever written. Jane pulled out a copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and ran her finger over the spine.

"You like Shakespeare?" Nancy asked as she wandered over towards her

Jane nodded. "The library in our town didn't have many of his plays. But I read all the ones they did have a few times." The library in town probably had less books than the Wheelers did but she felt too embarrassed to say this. Mrs. Donna hadn't mentioned that they were rich. She wished she had known ahead of time so she could have prepared herself mentally.

"I was going to help my mom with lunch." She said, "If you want you can stay here and read and when we're ready to eat I can come up and let you know."

Jane nodded. "Yeah, okay. Thank you."

Her eyes followed Nancy as she walked out of the room and disappeared into the hallway. Despite her love of books and all things reading Jane felt impossibly small inside the room. Especially when she was alone. She walked over to the middle of the room and sat down in one of the chairs. The one that faced the door. She wondered if she would ever be able to relax in a house so different from what she was used to. Not to mention that the house was full of strangers. Nancy and Karen were nice, yes. But she didn't know them. They

weren't her dad.

Tears made her throat burn but she quickly sniffled them away and opened the book in her lap. When immersed in the fictional world of the Duke of Athens and the queen of the Amazons it was easy to let her problems fade into the background. Though she wasn't lost enough to forget the itchy collar that constantly annoyed the back of her neck.

Jane was halfway through the first act when she heard creaking floorboards close by. Her head snapped up so fast that pain shot through the back of her neck, but she managed to suppress a wince. Her eyes landed on the boy that stood in the doorway of the library. He was long and lanky, with his clothes hanging off of him and his pants not long enough to cover his ankles. His hair was jet back and hung low enough in his eyes that she figured he needed a haircut. Freckles were scattered across his pale cheeks as if someone had flicked a paintbrush in his direction. He stopped dead in his tracks when her eyes landed on him and she felt her cheeks go warm with embarrassment, as if she had been caught doing something she shouldn't.

"Sorry." He said quickly. "No one's usually in here. I didn't think you were coming until later."

Jane closed the book with her index finger keeping her place. "It's okay." She said, putting her hands on the arm rest and starting to push herself to her feet. "I can leave."

"No, no, you don't have to." He said. "You stay. I was just grabbing something."

"Okay."

She tilted her head back down towards her book but kept her eyes fixed on him as he walked across the room and over to a set of shelves. Jane felt foolish for noticing a cute boy when her father was god knows where and probably scared out of his mind. No one *really* knew where they took the Jews. There was talk of camps, soldiers who acted like monsters, and barbed wire fences. Jane had once heard a whisper about gas chambers. But no one knew what was true

and what was just talk. Guilt ate away at her for eyeing a boy when she could only imagine what was happening to her father and friends.

"Did you ever read this?"

Jane looked up from her book and over at him. She squinted to read the cover he was holding. *The Hobbit*. "Yeah." She answered. "But I didn't like it much."

"Oh yeah?" he asked before sliding it back onto the shelf. "And why not?"

"It's such a boy's book."

A grin spread across his face. He was even more attractive when she smiled. "Okay, Miss Jane. Then what books do you like?"

The temptation to smile made her face twitch but she did her best to suppress it. She folded down the corner of her page before getting to her feet and walking over to where he stood. Jane could feel his eyes watching her as she scanned the books on display. She hummed and ran her finger over a few of the spines. "Hm... *Pygmalion*?"

"Higgins is a prick, Eliza is annoying. Next."

Her lips twitched once more but she forced them back into place. "The *Picture of Dorian Gray*?"

"Meh."

She shot him a halfhearted glare. "You're hard to please." Jane looked back at the shelves and looked for a moment longer. Her eyes lit up at the sight of a very familiar title. "Oh, now we're talking." She said as she hooked her finger over the spine and pulled it out.

"You've got to be kidding me." Mike said when he saw her selection. "*Gone with the Wind* is such a girl's book."

Jane ignored him and started flipping through the pages. As she did she did her best impression of what she thought Scarlett O'Hara would sound like. "With God as my witness I will never go hungry

again!"

Mike rolled his eyes. "Scarlett is a self-absorbed drama queen."

"She kind of reminds me of one of my friends."

"I'm so sorry."

Jane snorted while managing to keep her straight face. She continued flipping the pages until she stopped on a random one. Her eyes landed on another familiar line before she read in a dramatic tone. "They were the eyes of a happy woman, a woman around whom storms might blow without ever ruffling the serene core of her being."

Mike scoffed and grabbed the book from her hands. "No more of that." He said, then shut it and put it back on the shelf where she had taken it from. "I suppose your favorite Shakespeare play is *Romeo and Juliet*? 'What's in a name? that which we call a rose' and all that crap?"

"Sounds like you've read it."

"Everyone has." He told her. "Doesn't mean I enjoyed it."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Do you like *anything*?" she asked him. "Because so far you haven't liked *any* of the books I've suggested."

A thoughtful expression passed over his face as he turned back towards the shelves. His head tilted back as he looked higher and higher up. A small smile tugged at his face before he stood on his toes to reach a book from a shelf more than a few feet above his head. Mike was a good bit taller than her and she found herself jealous that his height gave him access to more books than her. "You'll like this one." He said as he brought it down with him. "Gatsby."

"Everyone like's Gatsby." She said, watching him open the book to a page in the middle.

" You see I usually find myself among strangers because I drift here and there trying to forget the sad things that happened to me." He read.

His eyes looked up from the page to meet hers. Under his gaze she felt even more small than she had already. "I bet your family has Gatsby-like parties every weekend with a house like this." she said while doing her best to not sound bitter. She did okay if she said so herself.

"Do you think everyone with a big house has a grand social life?" Not sure how to respond Jane simply shrugged. She *had* always thought so. "A house like this gets lonely quickly. Just because you have the room to have company doesn't mean you do. Until now."

Jane felt her cheeks getting warm but she ignored it. "I don't think I count."

Mike closed the book and put it back on its spot up above his head. "Sure you do. You're a VIP."

She has to resist the urge to scoff at such a ridiculous statement. "Oh yeah? And why is that?"

"No one ever spends the night here."

He was trying to be nice. To be friendly. But they were worlds different. Jane had only ever imagined a place as grand as the one he woke up in every day. Their paths had crossed after a series of unfortunate events and, had they not happened, he wouldn't have looked her way twice. Would he still talk to her if she hadn't done herself up in her Sunday Best? The thought made her feel bitter towards Mrs. Donna for making her wear the blasted dress. "I'm not a VIP." She said. Her tone came out more sour than she intended it to but she didn't try to correct it. The ghost of her father's voice scolded her in her head for being rude to her host. "I'm just the Jew girl you're hiding in the closet."

Any hint of a smile fell from Mike's face. Though she meant what she said she regretted saying it almost instantly. "That has nothing to do with it."

"Doesn't it?"

"Well it doesn't matter." He said. "The world isn't split into Nazi's and

Jews. There's people in between."

He was getting annoyed with her and she could tell. Without her father Jane seemed to have developed a talent for annoying people easily and not being able to stop. "And what's the in between then?"

"People who don't believe that people like you deserve to be treated any different."

His words were so genuine that they felt like a punch to the chest. Her feet were suddenly itching to flee the room. Back at school, wearing pants and dressing like all the guys, boys were never intimidating. When she first cut her hair short a few years back they treated her like one of them. But while wearing a dress with her hair past her shoulders and inside an environment totally foreign to her the boy in front of her was just as intimidating as the soldiers that patrolled the streets. His eyes scanned her face and she could only imagine what he saw. "I have to go." She blurted out before taking a few steps back. "I'll see you later."

Jane grabbed her book off of the chair before darting out of the room. She sucked air into her lungs once she was out in the hallway and practically running up the stairs to her new room. For a moment, with him looking at her so intensely, she had been unable to breathe. Everything was new to her. Feeling nervous around a boy was just another new feeling to her.

She didn't stop running until she disappeared into her hidden bedroom. Jane flopped down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. She wanted to leave. She wanted to go back to the way things were before people blamed everything wrong with the country on Jews. Why was her father, someone who had been nothing but nice to everyone he met, being taken away and punished? Or her friends, children, who held no responsibility for anything other than their homework.

She wanted to scream in the face of the Nazi's that they were making a mistake.

But she also didn't want to get shot.

2. Heroes Die First

guys please let me know if you would like longer chapters with more time jumps or shorter chapters with less time jumps (and probably faster updates). any and all feedback is appreciated!

Jane walked, tenth in line, holding tightly onto her suitcase as she marched. The eyes of those who remained, who weren't being taken from their houses, watched their every step. Obling at them like animals in a zoo. Three people in front of her was one of her best friends Rita. She was a short and petite girl who got picked on in school. They were being taken from their homes to an unknown place. No one was told much. Just that they had to grab their things and leave. Everyone in her neighborhood who had been ordered by the government to wear the Star on their shirt trudged through the streets and tried to ignore the soldiers that loaded held guns.

Her arms and legs were tired from walking for so long. It seemed their journey would never end. They weren't allowed to talk so she was only able to look up at her father with a pleading look. As if he could do something. As if he wasn't as helpless as she was. Anxiety weighed her down and made it harder for her to walk. When she wasn't looking she tripped over a rock and landed on her hands and knees.

Her father immediately dropped down to her side. "Jane, you need to get up." He told her as he tugged on her arm.

Jane tried to push herself up but only fell back to the ground when pain shot up her leg from her ankle. "I can't." she choked out. Panic crashed over her as she wondered if it was broken.

"Jane, you *have* to get up." Now he was pleading. The desperation in his voice only made her feel more panicked. What exactly was he so scared of?

She got her answer only seconds later when she heard the booming and authoritative voice of a soldier behind her. "What's going on here?" when she turned to look at him she found herself only able to look at

the machine gun in his hands that was easily as long as her torso. "Get up and keep going."

"I can't." her voice came out fragile and weak sounding. Jane knew she said the wrong thing the second the words left her lips.

The soldier gave no reply as he held up the gun and pointed it right at her face. The barrel was only inches away from her and if she squinted she might have been able to make out the bullet that was about to put a hole through her head. There was no time to scream or make an attempt to get away. She could only wait.

Jane gasped for air as she bolted upright in bed, her arms flailing at her sides. Her eyes desperately scanned the room for any sign of danger. Instead she only found the room she had moved into the day before. She had borrowed a mirror and clock that weren't being used in an attempt to make the room homier. According to the clock it was just past seven AM. The last time she had checked the time it had been almost three in the morning. Jane considered staying in bed just a little bit longer until she thought of the possibility of breakfast. She hadn't eaten much dinner the night before, too nervous to have an appetite. But now she was starving.

She dug around in the dresser for clothes to change into. Jane picked out both her favorite pants and shirt, hoping they might make her feel better. Back at school the other girls used to tease her for looking so boyish. The boys had gotten used to it and hardly even thought of her as a girl. With one glance in the mirror she already felt a bit more like her old self. The dress and braid had been a version of her that didn't at all represent who she was. But her mess of curls and petite figure hidden under baggy clothes was what she felt most herself in.

As she climbed out of the closet and headed down towards the stairs she wondered if pretending to be some prim and proper girly girl would backfire on her. What would the family think of her? Would they be as accepting of her tom boyishness as they had been of her the day the day before? The possibility that they wouldn't be made her consider turning around and running back to her room. But she was already on the first floor and could hear the family chatting in the dining room.

All five pairs of eyes landed on her as she stepped in the doorway. Next to Mike was a bowl of hot cereal and a small plate of fruit. She wasn't surprised that, with her luck, the only open seat would be next to him. They hadn't spoken a word since they were in the library and, though it could have easily been her mind playing tricks on her, she could feel tension in the air. She could feel his eyes glued to her as she lowered herself into the chair next to him. Jane listened as the rest of the family went back to discussing a news report that had been on the radio that morning. She desperately hoped his attention would move off of her.

"Your hair." He said bluntly.

It didn't come as much surprise that her wish didn't come true.

"What about it?" she asked before stabbing a strawberry with her fork and popping it in her mouth.

Though her eyes were fixed in front of her she could see him watching her in his peripheral vision. "I didn't think it was curly."

"You don't know much about me." She pointed out. "Guess I'm full of surprises."

Jane listened to what the others were saying as silence fell over the two teens. She pretended not to be interested when they said that the Japanese had bombed the Americans and that they were likely going to join the war. The Wheelers didn't seem to agree with the views of the Nazi party considering they were hiding a Jewish girl in their house. Still she planned on being mindful of what she said. 'You never know' her father had been saying since the start of the war. It was best to keep her mouth shut until she got a better idea on where they stood.

"I wonder what it's like." Nancy said in between spoonful's of oatmeal. "To be bombed."

Karen looked sharply up from her breakfast to glare at her daughter. "Don't wonder such things." She snapped. "It's bad luck."

Nancy set her spoon down. "We haven't had one air raid within miles

of here once." She replied sharply. "Don't you think it's a bit suspicious?"

"*Nancy.*"

But she ignored her mother and looked over at Jane. "Did they have any air raids where you're from?"

Nearly everyone's mouths dropped open in shock. As if they couldn't believe what they were hearing. But Jane recognized the expression on Nancy's face. It was the same one she always wore when she was trying to prove a point. She wondered if they were both stubborn girls who got scolded by their parents often. The thought made her less reluctant to answer the question. "Yeah." She said. Jane tried her best to not sound too bothered by the fact. "A few times."

Next to her Mike's eyes looked just about ready to pop out of his head. "What's it like?"

Jane shrugged. She wasn't used to so many people paying such close attention to her. "It's better sometimes than others. When it's quiet no one gets really worried other than the kids. But when it's loud that means it's close and everyone gets nervous."

Holly, who sat across from her, spoke up. Though Jane wasn't exactly the best with kids Holly seemed like a sweet girl. Plus she was her host too. "We do drills at school." She announced. "We all go in the hallway and do this." She tilted her head down towards her chest and put her hand on top of her head.

Jane's reply slipped right out before she could stop herself. "That's not really what you're supposed to do." It was the perfect example of why she wasn't good with kids. She just didn't know how to talk to them.

"Then what do you do?" Ted Wheeler asked. She did her best to ignore the skepticism in his voice.

She set her spoon down and avoided looking at anyone. "Well if you do that and something falls on top of you you're guaranteed to break your neck." Jane said. "The best thing to do is to find a bomb shelter that isn't underneath a building. That way if it collapses there's not

much that's coming down."

Jane had known for a while that those who lived closer to the city had to worry more about air raids than those who lived more towards the country. But she didn't think that they wouldn't know what to do. She and her friends were convinced that the 'hands over the head' procedure was made up just to make people feel safer and more prepared. She looked at their expressions, all of them looking a little nervous. "Do you guys have a bomb shelter?"

"We have a shed out in the backyard." Karen replied. "Do you think that will work?"

"Yeah, that's fine." She lied. It was better than nothing. And if it was the best they could do she figured it was best to make them feel better about it.

With her reassurance the conversation quickly moved to other topics, but Jane's mind stayed put on air raids. She intended on sneaking out to inspect the shed as soon as she could.

xXx

"What's that sound?"

Jane was standing in the kitchen next to Nancy and cutting up onions. She'd been living with the Wheelers for several weeks and had started helping out with dinner in hopes of feeling more useful. Though she felt more relaxed and less on edge she had yet to feel at home. She wasn't sure she ever would. Any time company was over she had to hide up in her room until someone came up to let her know she could come out. It wasn't the same as living in the small house with her father and barely making ends meet but it was safe. She knew very well that all he had wanted was for her to be safe.

But when she heard the sound of a very familiar siren she longer felt safe. Her stomach plummeted and she dropped the knife onto the counter. "Air raid." She said simply before turning back to Nancy. The fear she could feel bubbling up her throat from the pit of her stomach was mirrored on the other girls' face.

Without another word they bolted for the back door. From several places inside the house she could hear hurried and frantic footsteps. Karen and Ted were close behind her as they scrambled out from the living room and she managed to catch a glimpse of Mike barreling down the stairs. Jane, who was the first in line, flung the back door open and sprinted out to the shed across the lawn. She hadn't taken one step outside since she entered the Wheeler house. Under any other circumstances she would have been worried about the neighbors seeing her. The fresh spring air felt harsh in her lungs. But she kept running.

Once she reached the small shed she ripped the door open and held it open until Nancy reached her. As the rest of the family came crashing in she searched for a light. Jane had heard of some areas in Germany shutting off the power during an air raid so that, once night fell, houses would disappear into the dark. The sky had turned a deep shade of orange and she figured, if they were in fact in one of those areas, they would have light for at least a few minutes.

The shed door closed once Mike was safely inside and left them seeing nothing but black. They all bumped into one another as they searched for the light switch. The only sound was heavy breathing and sirens in the distance. They harmonized in a haunting tune she didn't think she would ever forget. Ted was the first to find the switch and illuminated the small shed when he flicked it on. Though the second he did Jane wished he hadn't. She found herself unable to look in the fearful faces of the family. Instead she looked down at the ground and her old ratty sneakers.

"Everyone okay?" Karen asked between pants.

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

It was a miracle that Holly wasn't a sobbing mess.

Wait a second...

Jane looked up from the floor to once again search the shed. Only this time she was looking for a familiar set of blonde pigtails. Ted and

Karen stood across from her, both with flushed faces from running. And there was no denying Mike and Nancy were present since she was squished in between them. But the girl was nowhere to be seen.

Nancy seemed to be able to read her mind because moments later she spoke up. "Where's Holly?"

Just as panic began to settle over the rest of them Jane pushed past Mike, who stood between her and the door. No one seemed to register what she was doing until she pushed the doors open and sprinted back across the yard towards the house. She could hear them calling after her as she ran but didn't dare look back to see if they were following her.

The back door was still wide open so she simply ran inside. The sound of sirens in the distance weren't quite loud enough to overpower her footsteps echoing through the house. She darted from room to room on the first floor with no sign of the little girl. Jane ran from room to room, looking underneath tables and chairs. The more places she checked with no sign of her the more her chest seemed to tighten. Breathing became more and more difficult as she ran through the house. Just as she reached the bottom of the stairs the lights in the house died and left her eyes struggling to see.

Awesome.

Jane held her hands out in front of her as she started to climb up the stairs. She was only halfway up when her eyes began to adjust to the darkness. Though she was only able to make out general shapes, and she stumbled on a few of the steps, she continued as fast as she could. The house was so big and had so many rooms that she felt helpless. There were so many places for a scared little girl to hide.

"Holly!" she yelled into the darkness as she started opening every door on the second floor. "Holly where are you?!" Jane wanted to scream at the sirens to shut up so she could listen for a reply.

She made it all the way down to the end of the hallway and there was still no sign of her. Jane turned around and ran back over to the stairs. There weren't as many rooms on the third floor as there were on the second. She told herself that Holly would be up there. She had

to be. Jane refused to let herself think about the possibility that Holly had run outside somewhere. Just one of the many pieces of advice her dad had given her echoed in the back of her head. *Never be a hero* he had said *the heroes are the first to die*.

Jane had always been rubbish at following directions.

"Holly!" she yelled once she was on the top floor. "Holly it's Jane!" the more doors she opened the more her heart started to pound. What if she couldn't find her? What if she ran away? What if, what if, what if? By the time Jane reached the old nursery door she was sure she was going to have an anxiety attack. She pushed the door open and frantically looked around the room. In the darkness she was just able to make out a shape towards the back of the room. She might not have thought much of it if she couldn't hear the sound of soft sobbing.

"Holly?"

"Jane!"

The dark shape moved and came closer until Holly was close enough to be seen. Her little arms clamped around Jane's leg and she could instantly feel tears starting to soak through her pants. "What's going on?!" she cried.

Jane bent down and picked the girl up, resting her on her hip before turning out of the room. "Everything's going to be okay." She said in her best attempt to comfort her. "We just have to get outside."

She felt Holly's arms wrap tightly around her neck. "I was looking for you because I thought you would know what to do."

"It's okay." Jane said. "I'm here."

She couldn't run down the steps nearly as fast as she would have liked in fear of dropping Holly. Though the girl could walk for herself Jane doubted she would be able to keep up. Besides, she was scared out of her wits and was not going to take the chance of getting separated. As terrified as she felt she could only imagine what was going through Holly's head. Jane had been through an air raid before (though she

had always been in the safety of an underground bomb shelter instead of a shed out in the country) and she knew what to expect. The whole experience was foreign and new to her.

She held tightly onto Holly as she ran as fast as her legs would carry her down to the first floor. Halfway down the second store staircase she heard what sounded like someone's voice. For a moment she wondered if the anxiety and stress had finally gotten to her. Maybe she'd finally reached her breaking point and her mind was playing tricks on her. She forced herself to brush it off until she heard the voice again, closer and clear enough to recognize. "Jane!"

"Mike?!"

She reached the bottom of the staircase on the first floor just in time to see the lanky boy stumble out of the dining room and into view. His cheeks were flushed and he looked almost as out of breath as she felt. Instead of turning around and running back out the door towards the shed (which is what she would have done) he hurried right over to her.

"What the hell are you doing?!" she yelled. Though he may have been able to hear her fine if she hadn't yelled she tended to get louder when she was stressed.

"Looking for you!" he shouted back.

Before she could respond, which was disappointing since she was the type that liked to have the last word, he grabbed hold of her arm and pulled her in the direction of the back door.

Just before they stepped outside there was a loud *BOOM*. The ground beneath them shook hard enough to cause them to stumble. Jane quickly grabbed onto his shoulder to keep herself and Holly upright. The sound of the bomb was *much* too close for her liking. She saw him look over at her but she refused to meet his gaze. It was bad enough that one person looked to her for guidance on air raids. Just as they felt stable enough to walk again and started back for the door she could hear the sound of a plane flying overhead.

"Wait!" she yelled, grabbing onto the back of his shirt and tugging

him backwards.

He managed to catch himself before he turned towards her with his eyebrows pulled together. "What?"

"If we go out now the planes could see us." She said. "That would just make us a target. We have to wait until they pass."

They stood side by side next to the door in silence. Holly had buried her face in Jane's neck and shook as she continued to cry. She rubbed the girls back in what was a hopeless attempt to comfort her. How she wished someone would comfort her. Jane remembered how air raids were back at home. The towns bomb shelter wasn't far from her house. She and her friends and their parents would all crowd around. She would be sandwiched between her father and her friends and they would all hold each other. The pain of how much she missed them hit her like a train.

Mike seemed to notice the tears rolling down her cheeks before she did. He looked over at her and the worried expression he wore only got worse. He pulled his sleeve down over his hand before reaching for her face and wiping away the few drops that had escaped her eyes. Her eyes fell down to the floor the second he touched her. She felt stupid and foolish for appearing so weak. Jane had to be strong for her father and all her friends that had been taken. And for her mom who died too sick and weak to even stand up on her own.

Mike's hand left her cheek once her face was dry. She only had time to miss the contact for a moment before she felt his fingers slip between hers. Jane immediately felt as if her face was on fire but she didn't dare move an inch. Instead she stared out at the shed, which she could just barely make out in the dark, and pray it would all be over soon.

3. Anger Management

Breathe. All she could do was breathe. With Holly pressed against her shoulder she could feel the little girls' pounding heartbeat and shaky breaths. Both hers and Mike's palms had gone sweaty but neither dared to let go of the other. Things between the two of them were finally rid of tension from their tiff the day they met. Jane prayed to whoever may have been listening that how they clung to one another wouldn't cause a drift once again. She kept her eyes fixed forward out the window, too afraid to look at him.

"I think we should go." Jane said after a few minutes had passed. "I think it's safe."

Out of her peripheral vision she saw him look over at her. "I can still hear the planes."

"You're going to hear them for a while." She told him. "But they're far enough away that it's safe."

"Okay."

They edged to the doorway and stared out for another moment. Some of the adrenaline had washed away and left her feeling reluctant to dart back out into the yard. What had she been thinking? But Holly wanted her mom, and she could only imaging what the rest of the family was feeling. Two of their kids had been separated from them. She had to get them back. Jane snuck a glance at Mike as she slipped her hand out of his grip.

Breathe.

She sucked air into her lungs. Mid spring air full of pollen that would eventually make her cough and sneeze.

Jane wrapped both her arms around Holly and bolted out into the lawn. Her feet landed heavily on the ground beneath her. She cast a glance behind her to make sure Mike was close behind. Sure enough he was only a few feet away. When she looked forward again she could just make out, miles in the distance, a large cloud of dust and

smoke. The bomb. She'd never seen the effect of a bomb until everything had settled. Jane forced herself to look back at the shed and run faster.

She practically crashed through the doors once she reached them. Jane turned around just in time to see Mike stumbling in behind her and slamming them shut. The rest of the family stood up and seemed on the verge of tears as Karen lifted Holly out of Jane's grip. She let her arms hang at her sides once she was no longer holding the girl and leaned back against the wall of the shed. The sound of the planes no longer overpowered the sound of the siren. They now sang together.

When Jane opened her eyes she found Mike standing next to her and watching her carefully. They were both panting and struggling to catch her breath. She pushed herself off of the wall and turned towards him. Jane could feel her temper starting to get the best of her. Before she could try to stop herself she was standing in front of him with her hands clenched at her sides. "Why did you do that?" she snapped. Though her anger and frustration wasn't aimed at him personally he had been the straw that broke the camel's back

Confusion passed over his face. She already regretted popping off on him but she didn't think she could stop herself. "What?"

"Why did you follow me?" Everything in Janes mind was screaming at her to stop.

Mike opened his mouth but, for a moment, nothing came out. Jane could feel the rest of the family watching the interaction carefully but she didn't care. She was angry. She was tired. And she needed to yell at someone. She knew that she was wrong to take her anger out on him, especially considering he had been nice to her and let her live in his house, but for the time being she didn't seem to care enough to stop.

"I don't know, I just did." He replied. He and probably everyone else in the shed was clearly confused as to why she was so angry all of a sudden. Less than five minutes ago he'd been wiping her tears and holding her hand. "Why did you go all by yourself?"

"Because the less people who go the safer it is."

She watched him roll his eyes at her. "Okay, Little Miss Expert."

A fire was lit in the pit of Jane's stomach. His privilege disgusted her. More than ever she wished she was with her father. Or her friends. Or anyone who understood where she had come from. In that moment she likely would have marched all the way over to the camps where people were being taken to and walked in freely if it meant she got to get away from Mike Wheeler. "I know a lot more than you do." Jane could feel her hands shaking by her sides. If she wasn't living in his house she would have punched him. Even if he was a bit too tall and she would probably have to stand on her toes just to reach him. "Come talk to me when your family and friends get taken away by the Nazi's. Or when people start breaking in your windows. Or when you have to walk in groups so that you have a better chance of defending yourself when you get jumped and beaten in the middle of the road."

Jane pressed her back against the wall and slid down until she was sitting on the ground. One thing she had been taught about arguments was that it was better to let the other person walk away first. Though there wasn't much room to move inside the shed she was planning on staying put. Out of the corner of her eye she watched him and waited for him to move. But he didn't. Seconds turned into minutes and minutes turned into half an hour and he still stood in the same spot. It seemed he had been taught the same thing.

Eventually everyone else's legs got too sore to stand and sat down on the ground. It was late at night and they were all tired. The sound of sirens, planes, and bombs in the distance created a haunting melody she would never forget. No one said much, Holly was really the only one who spoke. Once she was asleep silence fell over the group. Stuck with only her own thoughts Jane realized how much of an idiot she was for lashing out at Mike. There was not a doubt in her mind that they were going to ship her off to another family as soon as they could. The thought made her throat burn with premature tears. She had just started settling into the Wheeler house. As angry as she had been she didn't want to leave.

She rested the back of her head against the wall and waited for sleep

to overcome her. Though she was usually greeted with nightmares every night she still preferred them to her real life. At least the nightmares ended.

That night, sleeping upright in a cramped shed, she dreamt of an incoherent series of violent images. Her father being beaten, her friends being taken, soldiers coming into her house and taking everything they owned. Nightmares that weren't far from reality. Though there was one part of her dreams that didn't make sense. As she cowered in the living room and watched the soldiers take everything valuable to her she suddenly felt as if an earthquake had struck. She held tightly onto the wall and struggled to keep herself upright as the floor beneath her shook. Jane had never experienced an earthquake before but what else could it be?

"Jane."

Her eyes flew open and were greeted by a beam of sunlight pouring through the now open shed door. Karen, Ted, and Holly were already gone and Nancy stood by the door. To prop it open with her foot. She let out a groan and picked her head up before a headache washed over her. Jane brought her hands to her face to rub the sleep out of her eyes. When they dropped back in her lap her eyes landed on Mike sitting next to her. Shoulder to shoulder. God, had she been sleeping on him?

She practically jumped to her feet to get away from him. The anger that had taken over her the night before was now replaced with embarrassment and guilt. Her temper had never been a friend to her but she used to have at least a little control over it. As Mike stood up she searched his face for any sign that he was upset with her but was unable to find an answer either way. It only made her feel more nervous.

"Are you okay?" he asked once he was standing. She hadn't been able to see with the lights out but he was tall enough that the top of his head barely reached the ceiling of the shed. It was a miracle he fit inside. He had also developed dark circles over night (which Jane was sure she had as well).

She nodded silently. Her throat was dry both from a lack of water

and the inability to think of a response. Instead of trying harder to come up with one she turned and walked out the doors of the shed and went back up to the house.

It was Sunday morning, meaning everyone was home for the day. Despite the fact that she was free to wander around the house as she pleased Jane went straight into her room. She changed into a fresh change of clothes before grabbing one of the many books she had brought up from the library and hid underneath the covers. In the weeks that she had been living with the Wheelers she seemed to have run out of tears. She was left feeling dry and empty. If she had the tears she would have likely balled her eyes out.

She lay there for what felt like hours with her eyes fixed on the window across the room from her. Just before 10 AM she heard a soft knock on the door and shortly after Nancy cracked it open and ducked inside. "Hey." She said as she closed it over behind her.

"Hey." Jane replied shortly.

Nancy walked over and sat on the edge of her bed. She could practically see the gears in the older girls' head turning. Jane stayed quiet and waited for her to speak. "I can't even imagine what you've been through." She said after a few moments had passed. "None of this is fair to you."

Jane pushed herself upright. She almost never talked about her life before going into hiding and how hard it had been. No one ever asked either. It was an unspoken understanding between everyone. So why was Nancy bringing it up?

"You can talk to us, any of us, about anything." She continued. "But I get that you might not want to. So I figured this might come in handy."

Nancy held out a notebook towards her. It was plain black and had a ribbon placeholder tucked in between the pages. She took it carefully and flipped through the blank pages before looking back up at her. "Thank you."

"And, you know, Mike is just trying to help." She said. "He's kind of

an idiot but I think he just doesn't know where you're coming from. He just doesn't get it."

Jane's face instantly went up five degrees. "I know." She muttered. One thing she definitely needed to work on was admitting when she was in the wrong. It helped that she was talking to Nancy and not to Mike himself.

Nancy offered her a small smile. One thing she had noticed about her was that she never felt like she had to explain herself much. Even if Nancy didn't understand she had infinite sympathy for her. And not in a way that made her feel pitied. "I'll come get you when lunch is ready, okay?"

"Okay."

Nancy got on her feet once again and ducked out the door. Shortly after she could hear the door to the nursery close. Jane let out a small sigh as she looked back down at the notebook. She hadn't kept a diary since she was thirteen years old. Back when she was first going through puberty. She used to write letters to her mom asking for guidance and advice on all the things womanly her dad couldn't help her with. Jane remembered how her body used to ache she missed her so bad. She never imagined she'd have to feel the same pain about almost everyone she knew.

Jane reached over to her nightstand and grabbed the pencil that had been sitting unused. She tied her hair back and got to writing.

Dear mom,

I remember when you first got sick. It felt like I was stuck in one spot and the whole world was moving without me and leaving me in the dust. The harder I tried to keep up with everyone the more stuck I seemed to be. I kind of feel like that all over again. Only this time I could get killed if I don't keep up with everyone else.

I think you would like Karen. And I think dad would like Ted. I could see the four of you sitting around and having tea and discussing politics in a version of the world where things hadn't turned to hell. I would grow up playing with Nancy and Mike and when I got old enough I would babysit

Holly. Maybe if things had gone that way I wouldn't end up being so mean to him.

I know what you would say if you saw the way I talked to him. And how embarrassed you would be. You would say the same thing you said whenever you saw me bickering with a boy in the schoolyard. 'Your father and I started off the exact same way. Things will change before you know what hit you'. Well you'd definitely be wrong this time. Mike is nothing like dad. And I'm not like you.

I'm pretty sure I know what dad would say too. 'Boys your age like the feisty ones. That's why I pushed your mothers' buttons so much.'

You'd both be miserably wrong.

But I would still give anything to hear you guys say it.

Though at the same time I think you'd be disappointed in me. So I'm kind of glad you're not around to see how I turned out. Does that make me a bad daughter?

You used to never let me cut my hair short and would always make me wear dresses. And I know how you hated when I cursed and got an attitude with people. Maybe I'm acting out so that you'll come back just to yell at me. Or maybe I just turned too much like dad after spending too much time with him.

I miss you. I miss dad. I miss Gwen and Rita and even Donald Truman who used to push me during lunch. I just want things to be back to normal. I know you told me that it was bad karma to wish harm onto others but I wish someone would come and shoot Hitler right between the eyes.

It's kind of amazing how one person can be the catalyst for such change.

Amazing in the most awful way.

Jane.

4. Pity Party

I have a *lot* of chapters prewritten so you guys can expect daily updates for a while. Also someone asked me where the story takes place and I realized I never really said where it is. The story takes place in a more rural town in Germany. I hope you guys like this chapter :)

Dear Gwen,

Do you remember how we used to sing when we were in the bomb shelters? We would start singing and then everyone else would and then eventually we wouldn't be able to hear the sirens or the planes or the bombs. I never really realized how much better singing made it until I didn't do it.

The family I'm staying with doesn't have a bomb shelter. And they live in a more rural area so they don't have community shelters. There was an air raid a few days ago and we all had to hide in the shed out in the backyard. Everything is so much louder when you're above ground. And when everyone is silent.

I did something stupid. Well, technically I did two stupid things. The family has a little girl. Her name is Holly and she's only six years old. We all made it out to the shed but she wasn't there so I ran back inside. She was hiding up in my room because she came to look for me because she thought I would know what to do.

I think I've spent more time with Holly than with anyone else in the family. She gets out of school early now and I take care of her while her mother is doing things around the house. I never really liked kids before, as I'm sure you know, but Holly is the most kind and innocent thing I've ever been around. I feel like I'm going to taint her if I get too close to her. I think she likes me. I know she doesn't hate me because she let me play with her favorite doll yesterday.

So I went back for her. I wasn't going to let her be all alone and scared.

The boy, Mike, came after me. The three of us had to stay inside the

house for a little bit because the planes got close and we would have been spotted. I started crying. I never cry in front of anyone. I guess it helps that I don't really know him. He saw me crying (which was totally embarrassing) and held my hand.

I think you would like him. And I know you would tease me for saying so because we usually have the same type when it comes to guys.

I yelled at him when we got back to the shed. Okay, well, I didn't really yell. But I snapped at him. It's one thing for me to be stupid and go get Holly but what he did was way more stupid. Holly is six years old. She needs help in a situation like that. I don't need help.

So I snapped at him. It was stupid and I shouldn't have done it, I know. But I haven't been able to apologize yet. It's been four days. He doesn't really seem to care but every time I talk to him I think about how I would feel if I risked my life to help someone and all the thanks I got was being yelled at by some girl who can't keep her emotions in check.

Sometimes I hate him for coming after me. But most of the time I hate myself for being too stubborn to thank him.

I know you and Rita would tease me until graduation if I ever said any of this to you in person. But I wish you would. That would mean things were normal again.

I'm going to try to apologize today. Again.

It probably won't work. Again.

Jane.

Nancy had a friend over. Meaning both the nursery door and the closet door were shut. Jane sat on her bed reading *Gone with the Wind* for probably the hundredth time. She'd read it four times since she'd been living with the Wheelers. But it was her favorite book, her version of a security blanket, and she had yet to get sick of it.

Every muscle in her body froze at the sound of the nursery door opening. Her heart pounded so loudly in her chest she wondered if whoever was coming may have been able to hear it from where they stood. Jane shut the book and jumped to her feet. She scanned the

room for a place to hide as the approaching footsteps got louder and louder. But the room was so ridiculously small that there was no place to hide. Jane braced herself for the worst as she heard the closet door being pushed open, then the door to her room moments later.

She let out a sigh of relief when Holly appeared in the doorway and came right over to her. What exactly it was that she had been expecting she wasn't sure. But Jane had a tendency to prepare for the worst at all times. Even before the war. She was the realist of the family. Though her mother usually preferred the word 'pessimist'.

"We wanted to come up here because we thought you would be lonely." Holly said as she climbed onto Jane's bed.

"We?"

Before the small girl could reply Mike squeezed through the small entrance to her room and shut the closet door behind him. Despite how much she tried to stop it Jane could feel her cheeks getting hot. Only Nancy and Holly had been in her room before. Even back at her house she'd never had a boy in her room. She watched his eyes quickly scan the room, likely thinking about how small it was, before meeting hers.

"She wanted someone to do her hair." He told her. "I figured you'd do a better job than me."

Jane's lips threatened to smile. She'd managed to keep her straight face longer than she imagined she would. "You figured right."

She took a seat behind Holly on the bed while Mike sat on the floor in front of her. Jane quickly hid her diary under her blankets. She's mentioned him a few more times in it than she would have cared to admit. As she took out the pigtails Holly was already wearing saw Mike looking at the book on her bed with a small smirk on his face. "Nice book."

"Thanks." She replied dryly.

Holly informed her that she wanted a French braid, like the one Jane

had been wearing the day she moved in. Though she was sure it was above her skill level she figured she would at least try. As she worked Holly talked about school and all the things she had learned and all the friends she had.

"What was your school like?" she asked suddenly

Jane could feel Mike look up at her but she didn't dare look back at him. She had yet to say much about her life at all to the Wheelers. She certainly never talked about school. Though she had a feeling they were curious they'd never asked before. They were probably scared of touching some sort of nerve with her.

"It's like your school, I bet." Jane answered as her fingers worked a complicated pattern of twists in her hair. "I would go, I would learn, then we'd eat lunch, learn some more, and go home."

"Did you have friends?"

"Yes, two very good ones."

"What were their names?"

Jane hadn't spoken about her friends so much out loud since the day Gwen got taken. Rita had been taken a few weeks before so the two had been almost inseparable. The one day Jane hadn't gone to her house was the day they came for her family. Talking about them made her mouth feel weird. As if it had to readjust to the subject matter. "Gwen and Rita." She managed to say. "Gwen was blonde just like you."

"Did you have a boyfriend at school?"

Her lips twitched up dangerously high. "No, I didn't."

"Why not?"

She let out a sigh. Jane hadn't imagined she'd ever have to explain her lack of a love life to a six year old. In fact, she never thought she'd ever have to explain *anything* to a six year old. She wasn't usually so good with kids. "Well, I had friends who were boys. But not a *boyfriend*."

"Why?"

"Because the boys at my school didn't like me. Not like that. They only wanted to be my friend. They want pretty girls like you to be their girlfriend."

Holly fell silent but she could feel her trying to think of her next question. Jane hoped she would move on from the topic of boys. It wasn't a topic she was comfortable with anyway. But it was even more difficult to talk about with Mike sitting a few feet away from her.

Jane was more than halfway done with the braid when Holly asked her next question. "Why don't you go to school anymore?"

For a moment she debated whether she should have answered truthfully. On the one hand she didn't want to scare Holly and make her think the same thing could happen to her school. But on the other hand Jane had always thought it was important to be honest about what was going on to children and teens. They needed to know what kind of world they were growing up in. And why shouldn't she think it could happen to her school? It could.

"Because a plane dropped a bomb on it."

Holly turned around to face her with her mouth hanging open. Jane spared a quick glance at Mike who looked just as surprised by the answer. "Why would they do that?" the girl asked.

"Because it's a special school for people like me." Jane said. She hoped she wasn't saying too much. How would she know when she said enough? "And the people who dropped the bomb aren't nice to people like me."

"You mean Jews?"

She felt her stomach clench. The girl knew more than she let on. "Yeah."

"My teacher said that the things the people on the radio say about the Jews aren't true. That the soldiers bullies and that one day they're going to get in trouble."

Jane tied the hair tie at the end of the braid. It didn't look terrible but it certainly wasn't as good as the one that Mrs. Donna had given her. "Your teacher's right."

"I'm glad you're living with us." Holly said. "Even though your daddy got taken away."

Jane felt her stomach take a nose dive to the floor. So fast she thought she might be sick. No one had mentioned her father directly since the day she found out he'd been taken. Everyone tiptoed around the subject. Jane hadn't even been sure that the Wheelers knew the extent of her situation. Though now it was clear that Mrs. Donna had told them about her father when she wasn't around.

She wished they didn't know.

She wished a million things were different.

Jane could feel Mike watching her carefully. She was, for the most part, good at keeping a poker face. But she wasn't so sure she had managed to keep it up after someone mentioning her dad. She didn't know if she wanted to cry, scream, or run. Probably a little bit of all three. Instead she was stuck in a room with a little girl who didn't know any better and a boy she didn't know how to apologize to.

Moments passed and no one spoke a word. If she listened hard enough she could hear voices coming from one of the lower levels. Just when she thought she couldn't take it anymore Mike did her the favor of speaking up. "Hey, Holly, why don't you go look at your braid in the bathroom downstairs?"

"Okay." She said cheerfully before hopping off the bed and disappearing out the door.

Jane felt empty and hallow. Like someone had reached down her throat and ripped out all her insides. She was left with only her skin that was about to collapse at any moment. A bug could knock her over. If she were outside the soft spring wind could have easily carried her away.

"Jane?" she heard Mike ask.

But she didn't have the energy or the words to reply. It took everything in her to keep her bottom lip from trembling. She thought she'd run out of tears. She'd been proved wrong by one simple comment.

A tear escaped and rolled down her cheek. Then another and another.

Even with her eyes fixed on a spot on her bed she could see Mike pushing himself to his feet and walking the short distance to her bed. He sat in a spot that left some distance between them but close enough that he could easily touch her if he tried. She didn't know if she wanted him to or not.

Jane brought her hands up to cover her face. It was the second time in a week she had cried in front of him. "I'm sorry." She mumbled behind her hands. Her voice came out weak and pathetic sounding.

"Sorry for what?"

"I don't know." She cursed herself for not being able to say the truth.

For a while they stayed like that. Jane hiding behind her hands and Mike silently listening to her sniffles. She couldn't decide if she felt more foolish for vulnerable. It could have easily been a dead tie. She wanted to disappear, to sink into the blankets and never emerge. But at the same time she was thankful for his presence. If she were alone she may have totally broken down. She hoped Holly wouldn't come back up so that she wouldn't have to pull herself together.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed when Mike spoke up. It could have easily been an hour. It certainly felt like one. "Do you need a hug?" he asked quietly, just loud enough for her to hear.

Jane dropped her hands back into her lap. She could only imagine how much of a mess she looked. But he didn't seem to care too much so she didn't either. "What?"

"Holly says she doesn't like hugging me because I'm boney. But you kind of look like you need it."

She couldn't help it. She smiled. Not just a hint of a smile, like she had been limiting herself too, but a real smile. With her teeth

showing and everything. As soon as she realized what she'd done her expression fell and a new wave of tears overcame her. Mike didn't wait for a response and moved closer to her. His arms wrapped around her shoulders and yes, he was a little boney, but she didn't care. She hooked her arms around his neck and let herself cry freely.

Jane thought about what her friends would say if they saw her hanging onto a boy. Imagining what they would say only made her cry harder. She loved Holly, and Nancy was starting to be like the older sister she had never had, and she didn't know many people who would willingly run out of shelter during an air raid to come after her. But she hated everything that had happened that caused her to meet the Wheelers.

When she finally settled down she wiped her face on her shoulder. She kept her arms around him, not quite ready to let go. "I haven't smiled since my dad got taken away." She admitted once her tears had passed.

"Why?"

"Because everything he said made me smile." She said. "And why should I be smiling and having fun when he's been taken prisoner?"

Mike seemed to sit with this for a moment. Jane could only imagine what he thought of her. Especially considering she didn't seem to know how to act around him. Either she was ignoring him, yelling at him, or crying in front of him. It was like he gave off some kind of energy that made her emotions totally out of sorts. To make things worse she seemed incapable of apologizing to him.

"Are you going to go back to not smiling?" he eventually asked

Jane shrugged, her shoulders moving against his. "I don't know." She admitted, "Probably not."

"Good. It made you kind of intimidating."

Before she could stop herself she let out a short laugh. It had been awhile since she had laughed at all. It felt weird to do it again. She sat up straight and let her hands fall back in her lap but she didn't

move away from him. "I'm not intimidating."

"You kind of are." He said. He was smiling. She smiled back, which felt good. "I think my friends would be scared of you if they knew you."

Jane didn't know whether to be offended or laugh. "Why?"

"Well they're kind of scared of girls anyway." Mike explained. "But we don't have a lot of girls like you at my school."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "And what kind of girl is that?"

"Intimidating ones."

Oh. She had expected a different answer. It was a nice change that someone's opinion of her was affected more by her demeanor than her religion.

"But you're not scared of girls?" she asked. He was living in a house with four of them after all.

He smiled at her again. "Who said I'm not?"

Jane cracked another smile. She just couldn't help herself. It didn't help that his smile was dangerously contagious.

"You're really good with Holly." Mike noticed. "Do you have any younger siblings?"

She shook her head. "No. Just me and dad."

"What about your mom?"

Jane could feel her smile falter slightly. She was so used to no one ever mentioning her mother. Her friends knew better than to mention her in front of Jane. And she didn't know if her father never brought her up for her sake or his own. Either way she was thankful he didn't. Most of the time it was too painful to think about her too much. "Why is everyone all of a sudden so interested in me?" she asked. Answering a question with a question was her favorite method of deflection. Most people didn't pass up the opportunity to talk about

themselves.

"We've been interested this whole time." He said. Though he was still smiling his expression seemed to have fallen a bit. "We just didn't want to ask."

Silence fell over the room. From downstairs she could hear Nancy and her friend laughing at a joke. Jane remembered how her and her friends used to get kicked out of class for laughing too loudly. They would all go into the hall and only end up laughing even harder until their teacher sent them to the principal's office. She wondered if laughing too much was just another thing she had in common with Nancy.

Though she wasn't directly looking at him she could see Mike watching her out of her corner of her eye. She could hear Rita and Gwen nagging her in the back of her mind. *Just spit it out already!*

Jane cleared her throat before speaking up. Why was she so nervous? "Um, I'm sorry for... shouting at you the other day."

"What?"

She had a bit of a bad habit of mumbling when she struggled to say something. "I said I'm sorry for getting cross with you the other day. During the air raid." Jane watched his expression carefully for a response. How his dark eyebrows came together and his freckles moved together as his skin crinkled slightly. "I shouldn't have gotten mad at you I just... I'm not really good at handling my emotions."

"Really?" he asked sarcastically. "I couldn't tell."

Jane reached forward and gave his shoulder a shove. "Why did you come after me anyway? You could have gotten yourself killed for being so stupid."

Usually it was Jane that broke eye contact. She felt an odd sort of satisfaction from him being the one to look away first. "I don't know." He admitted, which seemed like a stupid reason. "You could have gotten yourself killed too."

"I can get myself killed by stepping outside." She reminded him. "I

can get myself killed for doing almost anything. You should be more careful since you have a better chance of living than I do."

He looked back at her with an expression harsher than the one he had been wearing only moments before. "You shouldn't say things like that."

"What? The truth?"

"We took you in to keep you safe." Mike said. "So you shouldn't talk about being killed. The war isn't going to last forever. You're going to be fine."

The same way she had the day they met in the library she felt small under his gaze. Something about Mike was so intense. She felt like a thousand pairs of eyes were watching her when he looked at her directly. He was a big fan of eye contact. She, on the other hand, was not. Yet she found herself unable to look away. As if her eyes had been locked into place and someone had stolen the keys. She could feel herself getting more and more nervous the longer he watched her.

"You sound so sure." She pointed out.

"I am."

If she could have moved she would have rolled her eyes. "But how can you be? You don't know what's going to happen. No one does."

He held her gaze for a moment longer before looking down at the floor. She wondered if he was going to reply to her at all. Before she could even think of changing the subject he pushed himself onto his feet. The ceiling of her room was slanted from the roof and the top of his head brushed the ceiling where he stood. Jane sometimes wondered if he had any clothes that fit him properly. They always either hung loosely off of him, several sizes too big, or were too short and left his wrists and ankles exposed. Most of the time it was a combination.

"I'll come get you when Nancy's friend leaves." He told her as he headed for the door. Just before he reached it he glanced back at her,

the smallest hint of a smile on his face. "Have fun with your book."

He disappeared when he closed the door behind him and left her sitting alone in the room feeling as if her face had been engulfed in flames. She didn't know whether to be embarrassed or ticked off by his teasing. Instead of reaching for her book she grabbed her journal from underneath her blankets and opened it up to the page she had been on earlier that morning.

Dear Gwen,

I apologized to him. I don't know how to say it went. I'm pretty sure he got mad at me almost immediately after. He told me not to talk about being killed and all that because his family was going to keep me safe. He sounded so sure too.

He's stupidly optimistic. Sometimes I want to slap some reality into him. Most of the time I wish I could be more like him.

He said I was intimidating. But he's easily the most intimidating person I've ever met. He's like medusa. I feel like I can't move when I look at him. And not in the way you want me to mean. In a way that totally sucks.

His little sister asked me about my friends. She also asked if I had a boyfriend. It would have been really funny if my life wasn't so momentarily depressing.

I need to stop throwing myself pity parties. But I wouldn't have to have them at all if this blasted war wasn't going on.

I know if you were here you'd tell me I'm hopelessly in love with him. I wish I could tell you to shut up in person. It sounds mean on paper.

I love you.

Please be okay.

Jane.

5. Fun in the Sun

yikes this chapters is kind of short. but I figured it was the chapter that they all deserve right now. thank you so mu everyone who had favorited, followed, and reviewed this story so far :)

Dear Dad,

I miss you so much. I'm trying to stay strong for you but I'm not sure how much longer I can do this. I've been telling myself that I need to stay strong so that I can come find you once this is all over but it's getting harder and harder to convince myself that that day will even come. How long do I have to wait? Five more years? Ten?

Mrs. Donna sent me a package the other day. A few books and things I didn't have room to pack. But she also sent my photo album. I didn't know how to tell her there was a reason why I wasn't going to bring it with me.

It's been sitting on my dresser since I opened the box. I don't think I can open it. Every once in a while someone will come in my room and I'll see them look at it. But no one has said anything about it. I have a feeling there's a lot of things they're afraid to say to me.

Apparently I'm intimidating.

In a different universe I could see you and mom getting along with Ted and Karen (who asked me to call them Ted and Karen. I'm doing my best to be well behaved and proper don't worry). I could see you and Ted talking about politics and mom and Karen telling embarrassing baby stories.

But it would probably never happen.

Their house is huge. You wouldn't believe it. Sometimes it hits me all over again out of nowhere. I'm living in a mansion. Yes, I'm living in a hidden room in a closet that is smaller than my bedroom at home. But everything else is so big. They have a library. I'm always either in my room, the kitchen, or the library.

They have a little girl, Holly. I think you'd be proud of me if you saw how good I am with her. Suddenly I'm able to talk to kids. It's kind of a miracle. She's six years old and is the cutest thing I've ever seen.

I want you to meet them.

There's a million things I want but I feel like wishing is sort of pointless right now.

Please be safe.

Jane.

The longer Jane lived with the Wheelers the easier it was to forget that she was in hiding. She could do nearly whatever she wanted inside the house. The only restrictions came with stepping outside of the house. Since the only people her age she knew were Nancy and Mike there was no desire to go out and meet up with friends. Every once in a while, when she was craving some fresh air, she would sit on the back patio once the sun started to set. Usually someone came with her "just to be safe". Most of the time she was content with leaving the windows open. But the warmer the weather got the more she found herself itching to leave the house.

Mike and Holly were off on summer break. She knew that they wanted to go on some sort of vacation and that she was holding them back. As much as she tried to ignore the guilt that made her stomach feel sour whenever she thought about it it was easier said than done. She had brought it up to Nancy and told her that they should just go.

"And leave you here all by yourself?" she asked, "That's not happening."

Later that night at dinner Nancy asked if they could just have a beach day and bring Jane with them. Even before Ted replied that it was too dangerous she knew what the answer was going to be. If the topic had come up her first couple of weeks at the Wheelers the thought would have terrified her. But she was starting to develop cabin fever and it was making her feel a little bit reckless.

By the time it was the beginning of July she started taking baths

instead of showers and pretending she was in a pool when she closed her eyes.

While she sat in her room reading a book (exactly like she had been doing for the past month and a half) she heard someone coming into the nursery. Despite the fact that she had yet to have a run in with a soldier since moving in she still felt her stomach jumping into her throat at the sound of footsteps. It was a worry she didn't think she could ever shake. She only had to wait a moment before the door opened and Nancy stepped in.

Jane could feel the confusion on her face as she took in the older girls' outfit. She wore a two piece swimsuit, the bottoms reaching halfway up her hips, underneath a large and open button up. A pair of sunglasses were perched on the bridge of her nose even though she was inside.

"Did you pack a swimsuit with you?" Nancy asked.

"Yeah, I was planning a few weekend getaways during my stay." Jane replied sarcastically.

Nancy snickered as she walked across the room. She grabbed Jane's arm and pulled her to her feet and then towards the door. "You can borrow one of mine. Good thing you fit in my clothes."

Jane could feel herself starting to get hopeful, which was always dangerous. "Did your parents change their mind about me going out?" she asked

"No." Nancy answered. Even she sounded disappointed. "But they're out with Holly and it's really nice out so we're going to make do."

"You mean sneak out?"

"No." she let go of her arm as they started down the staircase. "We're just going to hang out in the backyard. I saw both of our neighbors head out for the day so it'll be safe."

Jane followed Nancy into her room. More than once Holly had dragged her in for some girls only time. Her room was easily twice the size of Jane's room back at home and she had a queen sized bed.

When they came in Nancy walked straight over to her closet and dug through a set of drawers that were tucked away inside. Jane walked over and peeked at what Nancy was picking just as she pulled out a black and white pokadotted swimsuit. Normally Jane wouldn't be caught dead in something with pokadots. But she was so desperate she practically ran into the bathroom down the hall to put it on.

When she came back into Nancy's room she was handed an oversized button down and a pair of sunglasses. She slipped her arms through the sleeves and set the sunglasses on top of her head. "Are your parents going to be mad if they find me outside?" she asked. As much as she wanted to go out she would rather suffer through the cabin fever and still have a place to stay.

Nancy took off her glasses just so she could roll her eyes. "It will be fine." She said. "You need to stop worrying that they're going to kick you out. You're not going anywhere." Jane could feel her cheeks getting red hot which only seemed to make Nancy smile. "In case you haven't noticed you're practically part of the family now. And I don't think Holly would ever forgive us if we made you leave."

Before Jane could protest Nancy held onto her arm and headed out of the room. Though her mind was stuck on what she had said. Was it that obvious that she was scared of them abandoning her? Every so often Nancy was able to read her so easily. As if she were a book. Just a few weeks before they had been making dinner a bit little earlier than usual. Jane had gotten caught up in her thoughts about her parents and her friends and how much she missed them. Nancy took one look at her and told her that she would finish the rest of the meal.

When Jane stepped onto the back patio she had to place the sunglasses on her nose. She hadn't been outside during the day in a month and a half. Her eyes burned from the bright light and she had to squint even with the shades on. As Nancy started to attach a sprinkler to the hose Jane could hear music coming from somewhere in the distance. She looked over at the houses next door and spotted an open window in a room where the lights were on.

"I thought you said that they went out." Jane said. She had a hard time keeping the worry out of her voice.

Nancy looked up and followed her gaze to the open window next door. She stared at it for only a moment before she continued setting up the sprinkler. "It's probably the girl. She hardly ever comes out of the house. It'll be fine." Jane wasn't quite convinced, which Nancy seemed to pick up on. She stood up straight and dropped the sprinkler on the ground. "If they as we'll just say Mike had a friend over."

Jane nodded and glanced around the back yard. "Where is he?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Being weird somewhere." She said, only half joking. "He said he would come down in a little bit." Nancy perched her glasses on top of her head. "I'm going to go turn the water on. You'll be okay here?"

Her eyes instinctively glanced up to the open window next door. *She doesn't come out* Jane told herself. She could have laughed when she realized how much she and this girl next door had in common. "Yeah, I'll be okay."

Nancy nodded and walked to the side of the house following the hose. Once she was gone Jane sat down on the top step and pushed her glasses up. She wished she had a bit more of a disguise than a pair of sunglasses but she figured it would have to do. It wasn't as if anyone around knew who she was and would be able to recognize her.

It wasn't a minute later that she heard footsteps behind her. She looked over just in time to see Mike step onto the front porch. In shorts and a tank top she was able to see just how thin he was. He came over and sat down on the step next to her. Ever since her little episode a few weeks back things had been different. It got easier to talk to him and she didn't feel so nervous around him.

She grinned once she settled next to him. "You need a haircut." Jane commented. He'd needed a haircut back when she moved in. His bangs were starting to hang in his eyes and reach halfway down his neck.

Mike groaned. "Yeah, I know, my mom keeps reminding me." He said. "But I don't know if they want to spend the money on something we

don't need to."

His statement came as a bit of a shock to her. There was no doubt that the Wheelers were a wealthy family. But she never imagined that they could be struggling too. Compared to how she'd been living (eating only one meal some nights and consistently skipping out on paying the monthly bills) she would have never thought that a family living in such a grand lifestyle compared to her own would have difficulty. Mike seemed to pick up on her shock by the way he smirked. "I think you think too highly of us."

"Well I could cut your hair for you." Jane suggested, both desperate to change the subject and eager to help.

Mike's eyebrows came together and he eyed her suspiciously. "I don't know if I'd trust you with a pair of scissors near my head."

She shoved him lightly. "Shut up." Jane said. "I cut my dad's hair. And I cut my own hair. I'm due too. I'll do mine first so you can see I'm capable."

Still he didn't look convinced. "Maybe." He answered shortly.

Moments later Nancy came back around the corner of the house and walked back over to the sprinkler. "I don't think it's working." She said as she knelt down on the ground and began fiddling with it. "Mike, come here and help me."

Jane saw him roll his eyes before he got to his feet and walked over. From where she sat she could see Nancy screwing and unscrewing the hose into place. Once Mike was only a few feet away from her she unscrewed it entirely and quickly aimed it right for his face. He let out a shout as he tried to shield his face from the water while Nancy just laughed. With his hands in front of his face he kept heading towards Nancy until he was close enough to grab the hose. They each tugged on it for a few moments until Nancy's grip slipped.

She instantly ran over in Jane's direction. Before she knew what she was doing Nancy was pulling Jane onto her feet and hiding behind her. Jane grabbed onto her arms and tried to switch places her but Nancy was determined to stay shielded. The two girls struggled and

Jane began to regret not being more of an athletic person. She made the mistake of putting her back to Mike and moments later felt ice cold water hitting her back.

Jane squealed and tucked her head down towards her chest. In her ear she heard Nancy whispering. "How about you get the hose and I'll tackle him?"

She nodded and forced herself to turn to face Mike despite knowing he would have a perfect shot of her face. Nancy darted out from behind her and Jane quickly followed her lead. Mike seemed to realize what they were doing when he dropped the hose and started running towards the other end of the yard. While Nancy chased him Jane headed straight for the hose. Just as she reached down for it she heard and *thud* a few feet away. When she looked up she saw Nancy struggling to pin Mike down on the ground. Apparently she was stronger than both him and Jane.

By the time she reached them Nancy had managed to grab hold of both his wrists but he was still struggling. She held onto the hose tightly as she walked over. Once she reached them Nancy looked up at her. "Aim for his face!"

"No don't!"

Jane couldn't hold back a grin. She had given up on trying not to smile a few weeks back. It felt incredibly good to feel, even if only for a few moments, some sense of normalcy. Hanging out outside and having all her worries in the back inside the house. It helped that they didn't seem worried at all either. She remembered a few summers back when Rita's parents had bought a bunch of balloons that they filled with water and tossed around all afternoon. As much as she missed her friends she knew it was wrong to not let herself enjoy her time with her new ones. It's what they would want for her if they knew how upset she had been.

She aimed the hose right for Mike's face. Her and Nancy laughed and squealed as he tried to get away. After almost a minute he suddenly stopped struggling. Before she could wonder why he grabbed her by the ankle and pulled her down towards the ground. The hose fell from her grip as she fell down in the wet grass next to him. She could

feel him trying to reach around her for the hose and she did her best to push him off.

The three of them rolled around and wrestled for the hose in the grass for what felt like hours. They finally all collapsed on the ground soaking wet and out of breath. The hose lay running on the ground a few feet away from her and had started to create a muddy puddle. Jane stared up at the sky, her eyes shielded by sunglasses, and struggled to regulate her breathing once more. She couldn't remember the last time she had had so much fun. It had certainly been awhile.

Nancy suggested they get inside before the rest of the family came home and the three of them quickly hurried inside. They left wet footprints on the hardwood floors of the kitchen and living room which she figured they would have to wipe up before the others came home. All three of them grabbed a towel from the second floor bathroom before heading into their rooms to get dressed

Jane wrapped her hair up in the towel as she changed out of the borrowed bathing suit and into more comfortable clothes. For the first time since it had been sent to her she felt tempted to open her photo album. It was constantly staring at her and daring her to pick it up. She practically glared down at it sitting on top of her dresser but she couldn't bring herself to touch it. Instead she stared down at the picture taped onto the front. A shot of her from when she was a baby. She sat on the floor with a toy in her hand and stared wide eyed at the camera. Jane imagined her parents trying to get her attention so she would stare up at the camera.

She could feel the familiar throat-burning feeling and quickly turned her back on the album. Jane took a few deep breaths to collect her composure before heading out the door to wipe up the wet footprints they'd left on the floor.

6. Jane's Barber Shop

Jane knocked on Mike's bedroom door three times before waiting for a response. She'd only been in his room once before when Holly insisted that everyone play a game with her and that Jane went go her to get him. But she'd never been in there by herself. Even though being around Mike had gotten a lot easier over time she still found herself getting a little nervous whenever they were alone. He still had the same intensity that had a surprisingly strong effect on her. Sometimes her heart stopped when he looked directly at her. Other times it pounded.

When he opened his bedroom door she felt it stop.

"Still need that hair cut?" She asked, holding up the pair of scissors in her hands.

She watched his eyes move back and forth between the scissors to her face. "Hm... I don't know."

Jane rolled her eyes and grabbed his arm and tugged him forward. "You'll be fine. I'll do mine first so you can see just how talented I am." She said jokingly as she dragged him out of his room and into the bathroom.

Jane had already set down some towels on the floor to catch the hair she would be cutting. She had also brought in a radio that was plugged in and sitting on the back of the toilet. Mike sat down before turning it on and changing the station until he found one he was satisfied with. She brushed all the knots out of her hair and dampened it a bit (the way she always did when she cut her hair). As she prepared she could feel Mike watching her every move which admittedly made her a little bit nervous.

"Why did you start cutting your own hair?" he asked just as she picked up the scissors

Jane shrugged, "I don't know." She said. "I remember cutting my bangs once when I was 10. My parents didn't really get mad at me because I didn't do a bad job." She stared at herself in the mirror for a

moment before glancing at him. "Should I do bangs?"

"No." he said immediately. "You'll regret it, trust me."

She grinned as she turned back into the mirror. Jane brought the scissors up and cut her hair so it was just an inch or two longer than her chin. Her curls dropped onto the towel on the floor. She always thought it was amazing how much longer her hair looked once she cut it off.

"You're cutting off so much." Mike pointed out.

"Yeah." She agreed. "This is the longest my hair has been in years. I like to keep it short. It's a lot easier to manage that way"

He pushed his bangs back off of his forehead but they only fell back into his eyes seconds later. He had started doing it more and more as his hair got longer. "That's cool." Mike said. "I think short hair looks better."

Jane could feel her cheeks start to get hot. She ignored the feeling and kept cutting her hair.

It never took her very long but she was looking with a bit more hair than usual. She hummed along to the songs she recognized on the radio and answered the questions Mike asked her. The more time passed the more things people asked her. She was just glad he knew better than to ask anything too upsetting. When she was done she set the scissors down on the sink and brushed out her hair again. Mike helped her check to make sure he was even. He admitted that he was surprised she did a good job.

"You thought I was lying?"

"I thought you were stretching the truth."

She rolled her eyes at him and she started brushing out his hair before dampening it. He showed her how short he wanted his bangs and took in a shaky breath when she picked the scissors back up. "Why are you so nervous?"

He looked up at her through his bangs. "I've never had a non-

professional do my hair before."

Jane scoffed at him. "You're so privileged."

She stood so close to him that her legs were pressed against his. As she cut she was well aware of his eyes focused on her but she managed to ignore it and stare at his forehead. In her head she could hear her friends teasing her about being so close to him. All the girls in school had started getting boyfriends around freshman year. But it was something Jane had never been interested in. She would much rather be one of the boys than be *with* one of the boys. It may have had something to do with the fact that none of the boys in her school were interesting enough. Maybe it was because none of them found her interesting enough. Either way it didn't stop her friends from teasing her every time an older boy smiled at her in the hallway.

"Tell me about what you did before the war." Mike said suddenly, interrupting her train of thought.

It was amazing how such a simple statement could make her so nervous. "Why?"

"Because I want to know more about you."

Jane forced herself to look at him, her hand holding the scissors falling down to her side. With half of his bangs cut short and the other half still hanging in his eyes he looked. Little silly. It made him less intimidating to look directly at. "I'm not that exciting, Mike." She said.

He raised an eyebrow at her. The one on the side she had already cut. "Maybe you're more interesting than you think."

She stared at him for a moment before letting out a sigh. He was relentless sometimes. "What do you want to know?" she asked reluctantly as she started cutting again.

Mike fell silent as he thought. While he did Jane wondered what his sudden interest in her was. Every so often he would start asking her questions seemingly out of nowhere. But he didn't do it very often. She had a feeling that he was still a little hesitant to ask even though

things between them had changed. He spoke up just as she picked the brush to check how even the cut was. "Tell me about your school."

Jane let out a short sigh. "It used to be a regular school. But it's in a Jewish neighborhood. Once everything started all the non Jewish families pulled their kids out of school and sent them somewhere else. It kind of became an all Jewish school by accident." She said. Every time she talked about anything before living with the Wheelers she felt her chest go tight. But at the same time she felt a bit guilty for never talking about it. As if she were pretending it never happened which felt a bit unfair to everyone she knew.

"We used to stay after school and play football when things started getting bad because we were scared of walking home." She continued. Some kids would leave only twenty minutes before Sunday they were so afraid. She and her friends used to get home a little after four.

"Why?"

"Sometimes kids from the other school would wait down the street and beat us up." Jane said. She could feel his sympathy even without him saying a word and it was something she didn't want. "Ask me something else."

Mike hummed as he thought of another question. While she waited she moved to stand behind him so she could cut the back of his hair. She could already start to feel herself breathe easier now that he couldn't look at her directly. "Did your school have a dance every year in September?"

"Yeah."

"Did you ever go with anyone?"

Jane's eyebrows pulled together. The most anyone had talked about her love life in months was when Holly asked if she'd had a boyfriend. Even her friends let the topic fade when things with the war started to get serious. When kids in their classes started disappearing. Who cared about boys when their classroom of 25 turned into a class of 10? "Um, no. Not really." She answered after a

second's hesitation. "I mean I went with my friends. But not with a boy."

Mike shifted slightly. She wished she was better at reading people because she was starting to become thoroughly confused. "My school is having one once classes start." He said. "But I'm not sure if I'm going to go."

She wanted to point out that it was only mid August and that he had some time to think about the decision but figured she shouldn't. It had probably already occurred to him. "Why not?"

"Because there's no one in my school that I want to go with." Jane spotted his leg bouncing up and down out of the corner of her eye.

A small frown appeared on her face. Something in his voice sounded different but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Yet another example at how rubbish she was at reading people. Especially Mike. "Is there someone not from your school you'd want to go with?"

"Yeah."

She brushed off the hair that was stuck to his back onto the floor and continued cutting. There wasn't much left for her to do. "Well why don't you ask her, then?"

He shifted once more. Jane managed to hold herself back from snapping at him for moving when she was cutting his hair. Did he realize she was holding a pair of scissors just inches away from his neck? "Because she can't go."

She felt the crease in her forehead only get deeper. "How do you know?" she asked. "Did you ask her already?"

Jane heard him let out a sigh. "No. I just know she can't."

"Why?"

"Because she can't really... go out."

Jane felt like she was putting together the pieces of a puzzle in slow motion. She also felt like the pieces were the opposite of magnetic

and refused to stay together. "Is she like me?"

"Yeah."

She immediately wondered who he knew that was also hiding someone. Was it his friend Will who he had invited over a few times and was, as far as Jane could tell, his best friend? She would have thought that if someone he knew was also hiding someone that he would have mentioned it at some point in the past three months. That was a long time to keep that kind of knowledge to himself. Yet this was the first she was hearing of it. She also wondered how he had managed to meet his girl if she was in hiding. Didn't that sort of defeat the purpose?

Two pieces of the puzzle finally clicked and a realization hit her so fast she felt like she might be sick.

Oh.

Oh.

Jane immediately pulled her hands away from him as if he was ill with a contagious disease. Though she could have evened it out a bit more she felt the overwhelming need to escape up to her room. Her heart was pounding so fast that she worried it would suddenly burst out of her chest and make a mess in the room. She reached over and grabbed the brush off of the sink and ran it through his hair as quickly as she could. "You can still just go with your friends. I've always had fun when I've done that." Jane moved to stand in front of him but was unable to meet his gaze. "See? I didn't do terrible."

He stood up and she quickly moved to the side so he could stand in front of the mirror. Mike ran his fingers through his bangs as a small smile started to form. "I have to say I'm pleasantly surprised."

She managed to put on a smile and hoped it didn't look as forced as it felt. "I'm glad you like it." She couldn't even look at his reflection in the mirror. Jane started backing towards the door. Her feet were itching to run up to her room. "I'm going to go take a nap, I'll see you at dinner."

Before he could say another word she turned and headed down the hallway. She walked as fast as she could without seeming like she was in a hurry. Once she reached the stairs she took them two at a time so she could get away faster. Her chest felt tight, her throat felt sore, and she longed to be somewhere hidden. Somewhere where she could be alone.

She closed the nursery door behind her, which she never did, and practically ran into her room. Jane collapsed on her bed face down into her pillow. Her emotions were a cacophony of things she had never felt and it wasn't a combination that she enjoyed at all. More than ever she longed for someone that could give her advice or words of wisdom. Someone who wasn't related to Mike.

She wished that people came with an on and off switch for their emotions. Up in her room she would have switched off in a heartbeat. Jane was sick and tired of feeling things. The only thing she ever did was feel things. Just for a little bit, even if it was five minutes, she wanted to feel nothing.

Jane grabbed her notebook and pen from the nightstand next to her bed and sat up. She wracked her brain for someone to write to. Everyone she had previously written to were people she had no way of hearing back from. She had written to them enough times without a reply. It was a sickening feeling to ask questions to someone who might never give the answers. She bit off the cap of her pen and pushed up her sleeves when she finally thought of someone.

Dear Mike,

You are infinitely frustrating.

I don't have that much hope left in me but I seriously hope that you weren't talking about me.

There are a million reasons why you need to get that idea out of your head. Thinking about listing them all is giving me a migraine. Plus I think I would be sitting here writing for the next couple of weeks if I were going to list them all. I know you're a smart kid but you're so bloody stupid for thinking about me like that for even a fraction of a second.

Even if this war wasn't going on we wouldn't work out. We come from two incredibly different worlds. If we didn't know each other and we passed by one another on the street you wouldn't look at me twice and we both know it. I'm not hurt by the thought because I know that's just the way that things are.

When the war first started there was a boy at my school. His name was Gregory Sawyer. He started dating a Jewish girl named Janice. The kids in school bullied him more than they bullied her. They spit in his food, tripped him in the hallway, stole his clothes from the locker room. The day that we got let out of school for spring break a few kids ganged up on him and beat him up really bad. He was in the hospital for a while with a concussion and stitches. This was only a few months into the war when things weren't even that bad.

I don't want you to turn into Gregory.

If you've even thought about me in any sort of way for a second I want you to get that idea out of your head right now because I'm not going to let you risk your life just because you think the Jew girl living in the closet is interesting (or whatever you think of me that makes me so appealing that you're being so stupid).

I hate that you noticed me. And I hate that I noticed you.

My mother once told me that boys with dark hair and a good smile were the downfall of women in my family. She, like me, was right about pretty much everything she said.

Please for the love of god just ask out some girl from your school and fall desperately in love with her so you can forget about me. For your own sake.

Jane.

P.S. I hate you for this.

7. Donald Truman Ruins Everything

thank you everyone once again for keeping up with and enjoying this story. things are going to start getting a bit more exciting very soon ;)

Dear Rita,

I can practically hear you saying 'I told you so'. You're annoyingly right even when you're not here.

I've never had a crush on anyone before. It's not a fun feeling. I wish I could reach into my brain and rip out the part that's making me have these feelings. I don't know how do you do it. I think if I'd been dating boys as long as you've been I'd be exhausted. I feel like laying down just thinking about it.

I don't know who's the bigger idiot; me or him. It's probably him. I don't understand how he could think for a second that something could happen between us. Everything about us just is so different. My whole house could fit in the first three rooms of his. Also he doesn't like Gone With the Wind and I don't think that's something that I can overlook.

He said he likes short hair. And he said he wants to go to a school dance with a girl he knows can't go with him because she was like me.

I suppose I'm a bit stupid for not realizing what was going on with my feelings earlier. Then again, my emotions are a bit of a wreck right now.

I feel like I can't breathe when I'm around him. When he looks at me it's like everything in my body just forgets how to function. Even just thinking about him makes me feel all nervous. My hands get sweaty and my heart acts like I just ran a marathon. I hate it.

Even if this stupid war wasn't going on we wouldn't work out. Which just really sucks because I want it to work. Even though he can be incredibly annoying sometimes (most of the time) I really like him. He made me smile. Which, believe me, wasn't easy. I hadn't smiled in over a month. I was crying and he asked me if I needed a hug. He also said that his little sister didn't like hugging him because he's boney. She's kind of right.

Sometimes I can't decide if I want to kiss him or punch him in the face.

I think I get why he said I'm intimidating.

I need to get a grip on myself.

Jane.

Things didn't become nearly as awkward as Jane had expected them too. It probably helped that Mike had started school again so he wasn't around as much. During the day it was just her, Nancy, and Karen. Nancy had graduated a few years back and it didn't surprise either of them that she wasn't in university. Jane hadn't heard of a girl going onto higher education in years. As much as she knew Nancy wanted to go to school she was glad for her company. Having Nancy around made it easier to get through the day.

The longer she was with the Wheelers the more she began to open up. Slowly but surely. At dinner the night before she had done the unimaginable; speak about her mother. It had always been too difficult to talk about her at all. But most things were difficult for her to talk about so she started to push herself. All she had said, as they ate the meatloaf she had helped prepare, that it had once been her mother's favorite thing to make. They all looked at her for a moment like they couldn't believe what she was saying. She had found that it got easier to talk about hard things the more she did.

Jane and Nancy sat at the kitchen table drinking tea and picking at a plate of cookies. They had somehow landed on the topic of what they would do when the war was over. The all too familiar feeling of her chest tightening up made part of her want to change the topic as soon as she could. The other part of her reminded her that talking is what made things easier. That and writing her letters. So she suffered through the tightness and feeling like she couldn't breathe right with a small smile.

"I think I'd like to start a school one day." Nancy said in between sips. "A university for girls. For all girls. All races and religions."

A smile spread on Jane's face. It felt so good to smile again. "That sounds nice."

Nancy nodded. "I'd also like to move to the city. I kind of hate living in the country."

Jane's nose crinkled up. Even when she'd been living close to the city she hadn't been a fan of it. She much preferred the perfect amount of isolation of the area where the Wheelers lived. "The city isn't all it's cracked up to be. It's loud and smelly and dirty."

"I guess you would know better than me." Nancy picked up one of the cookies and took a bite. "What would you want to do?"

Jane thought for a moment. There were a million things she wanted to do but she was afraid of getting her hopes up too high. It was a sure way to let herself down. "I would find my dad and my friends. Move somewhere big enough that they can stay if they need to. And go back to school once it's rebuilt."

"Your school didn't even get rebuilt yet?"

She had to resist the urge to roll her eyes. "You think the government is going to pay for a Jewish school to be rebuilt right now?"

Jane watched her cheeks get red. "Right. Sorry."

"It's okay."

Nancy set her mug down. "Well those are all really attainable goals." Jane considered pointing out that finding her father and friends might not exactly be attainable but decided to enjoy Nancy's optimism. She may not have had much herself but she admired it in other people. "What's one thing you've never done before that you want to try once everything goes back to normal?"

Jane knew the answer in an instant. But her face felt hot from just thinking about admitting it out loud. She wracked her brain for another answer but came up with nothing. Most of the things she wanted were just everyday life things that she missed. There was only one thing she wanted that she'd never had before. It was never something she'd thought about before. Even when her friends starting bringing boys out to lunch with them Jane was always by herself.

Was there even a point to lying to Nancy? She figured there wasn't

unless she gave too much detail. She knew she wouldn't judge her, and she had a feeling she wouldn't tease her nearly as much as her friends would have. "Um..." knowing there was no point in lying didn't make the answer come out any easier. "I want to... have a boyfriend."

She watched Nancy's face light up and break into a huge grin. Jane wished she could take back what she said almost immediately. "Aw, really?" she asked. Nancy seemed more excited about the idea than she was. "That's so cute."

"Shut up." She grumbled.

But Nancy only grinned wider. She knew it would be a while before she let the topic go. "Is there someone in particular you're thinking of?"

Jane felt as if someone had taken a match and lit her face on fire. She couldn't believe she was talking about dating and boyfriends with Mike's sister. "Yeah." She admitted quietly.

"What's his name?"

She tried to think of a name of someone she had gone to school with so she didn't have to say the truth. The name that she blurted was, admittedly, not who she would have chosen had she been able to think about it a little longer. "Donald Truman."

Nancy grinned as she picked her mug back up and took a sip. From the other side of the house she could hear the front door opening and closing only moments later. Footsteps got louder and louder until Mike came into the kitchen. Needless to say, Jane was mortified. He walked right over to them and sat in the seat next to Nancy before grabbing a cookie from the plate. "What are you guys doing?" he asked

"Well, Jane was just going to tell me all about *Donald Truman*." Nancy replied in a teasingly flirty voice.

Jane felt her face burning even brighter so she picked up her mug in hopes of hiding behind it as she took a sip. "No, I wasn't." she

mumbled. How had she managed to get herself into such an embarrassing situation?

She watched Mike's eyebrow pull together and meet in the middle of his forehead. Though she wished he wouldn't because he always looked cute when he did it. "Isn't that the guy that used to tease you and push you around during lunch?"

"Yeah, but he doesn't anonym—" Jane's voice faltered and she set her mug back down on the table. "How'd you know that? I never told you about him."

Mike hesitated, his eyes darting down towards the plate in the middle of the table. "I think you did."

"No, I didn't." she said as she sat up straighter in her chair. "I haven't mentioned him since..." she felt as if she were choking on her own words when a realization hit her like a truck going 60 mph.

The only time she'd even thought about Donald Truman since moving in with the Wheelers was in a letter to her mother.

Jane felt like the ceiling came crashing down on her. The one place she felt safe to express her emotions freely and without judgement had just been ruined. Not to mention she'd written about Mike an embarrassing amount of times. The thought that he might have seen what she wrote about him made her want to disappear.

"Did you *read my diary*!?" Jane snapped. She hardly bothered to control the anger in her voice.

She waited and waited for him to respond, to deny it and convince her that she had mentioned Donald Truman at some point over the past few months. Anything that would make her feel just a little less mortified. But he stared at the plate of cookies and didn't say a word. The longer he went without responding the more she felt like her world was ending. He may as well have taken a direct look into her brain and read her mind.

Jane gave up on waiting and quickly stood up. Her chair scraped on the wooden floor when she pushed it out but she didn't care about

the noise. She also didn't care about the noise as she stormed off towards the stairs. Jane had half a mind to phone Mrs. Donna and ask if she could come back to her house. The thought of spending one more day in the same house as Mike made her feel like she was suffocating in her overwhelming feeling of betrayal.

Halfway through the living room she could hear someone's footsteps behind her. She prayed it was Nancy coming after her. Her hands were shaky by her sides. She was afraid if she stopped walking she would turn right back around and start hitting him. Just as she reached the bottom of the stairs she heard Mike's voice calling her. Couldn't she ever catch a break?

She turned on her heels and waited for him to reach her. She could only imagine the look on her face by the way he looked so sheepish as he approached her. But she didn't feel guilty. All she could feel was tears forming in her eyes and a black hole of embarrassment and hurt that had crashed into her stomach.

"Jane-" he began.

But she didn't want to hear it. What could he say that would make her feel better? She doubted there would be anything that could. "That was *private*." She hissed. Jane wanted more than anything to yell and scream at him at the top of her lungs but her voice seemed to lack the volume to do so. "Do you understand how incredibly violating that is?"

Mike seemed to have realized that he could offer no comfort and must have decided to silently wait for her to get everything out.

"When did you read it?" Jane intended on holding onto the hope that he hadn't seen what she wrote about him until the last possible second. She had mentioned Donald Truman in the first letter in the notebook. Maybe he'd had the sense to stop reading before he got too far in.

His eyes fell down to the floor. For once she didn't feel so nervous and scared around him. She was far too angry. "Last week."

She squeezed her eyes shut and let hot, angry tears fall down her

cheeks. Jane would have felt less exposed if she had been walking around the house naked. She wanted to go up to her room and never open the door ever again. But most of all she just wanted a hug. Her diary had been her safe space, the only time she didn't feel like she had to be so strong all the time. The only place where she felt safe with her emotions. It might have hurt less if the family kicked her out onto the street and left her for dead. She forced herself to open her eyes and look at him again. "How much did you read?"

Mike looked just about ready to cry too. As much as she didn't want to she found herself feeling bad. If only she was as cold blooded as she had tried to be when her father had first been taken. "Jane, I'm sorry."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "I'll take that as you read the whole thing." When he didn't respond she felt the black hold in her stomach get even blacker. "I can't believe you would do that to me. I thought you were my friend."

"I am."

Jane laughed in a way that lacked any humor. "No, you're not! If you were my friend you wouldn't even think of doing something like that." She pulled the sleeve of her sweatshirt over her hand and wiped her cheeks. Her fingers were still shaking. "How could you do something like that to me?"

He shifted his weight. With her three steps above him she was finally taller than him. It made her feel even less nervous around him. "I didn't do it to hurt you. I would never want to do that."

Jane stepped back onto the bottom stair and shook her head. What the hell did he think she was going to feel? Did he think she would thank him for violating her privacy? "I don't want to hear it, okay?" she said. "Please just leave me alone."

Without giving him the chance to respond she turned and took the stairs two at a time. Thankfully she didn't hear his footsteps following her again.

She slammed the nursery door behind her before crawling through

the door in the closet. For good measure she moved the chair in her room in front of the door so no one could open the door. It didn't have a lock so it was the best she could do. Just to make absolutely sure no one could come in she sat in the chair after grabbing her copy of Jane Eyre. As she always did when she was angry she read twice as fast as she usually did. She read about ten pages before she heard a soft knock on the door.

Jane turned around and waited for someone to try and open the door. Her hands gripped the arms of the chair tightly in preparation. Seconds ticked by and she heard nothing but silence. Was it Nancy coming to make her feel better? Mike once again attempting to apologize? Had Holly gotten home and come up to play with her? Out of the corner of her eye she saw a paper slide under the door and into her room before soft footsteps headed away from her door.

Once she no longer heard any sign of someone nearby she marked her page in her book and set it down. She reached for the letter with a slightly shaky hand. Sure enough she recognized the scribbly handwriting so common with boys. She felt a bitter taste form in her mouth at the irony that he was probably going to apologize through a letter when the whole thing had been started over letters.

Jane,

I know you don't want to hear it but I'm really sorry. The last thing I would ever want to do is hurt you. I had come up to your room one night to get you for dinner and the notebook was just sitting there.

You hardly ever talk to anyone about anything. You have no idea how hard I've been trying to get you to open up to me. We've all been trying. I just wanted to know you better and have a better understanding of where you're coming from.

I know it's stupid.

I hate that I hurt you. I think that you're the most remarkable person I've ever met. The fact that you're even able to function after everything you've been through totally blows my mind on a daily basis. I know you probably don't want to hear this but after I read it all I wanted to do was give you a hug. But you don't seem to be the hugging type.

You were wrong about one thing though. You wrote that if we were strangers and walked by each other in the street that I wouldn't look at you twice. I know you think you're right about most things but you couldn't be more wrong about that. You're easily the prettiest girl I've ever met.

I know that you're mad at me right now but I'll wait until you forgive me. I'll do absolutely anything to make it up to you.

The night of the air raid you asked me why I came after you. I didn't know how to tell you that I was terrified of something happening to you so I lied and said I didn't know. The thought of you getting hurt and me not being there to do anything made me feel sick. So I went after you.

You've probably noticed by now but I have a bit of a problem with impulsivity.

I wish things were different for you. Even though I feel incredibly lucky to have met you I hate everything that had to happen first. If there's anyone I know who deserves to just be happy it's definitely you.

I know you're going to be mad at me for a while. Which is fine, I deserve it. But when you're not mad anymore I'm going to show you that you're wrong and that it can work.

Mike.

Fat tear drops rolled down her cheeks and fell onto the letter as she red. His words were an emotional rollercoaster that left her feeling dizzy. Why did he have to have such an effect on her? Once she was done with the letter Jane attempted to throw the paper across the room. Instead it fluttered down onto the floor only a foot in front of her.

She pulled her legs up to her chest and put her head between her knees. Jane hadn't felt so alone in a long time. Not only had she been completely betrayed by someone she had come to care about but she had lost her one outlet that she could use to express the emotions she didn't dare express in front of others. She felt stupid and foolish for the way her heart was pounding as she thought over everything she had just read. *It can work.*

Was he trying to fool her or himself?

8. Makeup Breakdown

wow the feedback on my last chapter was simply incredible. getting comments from you guys telling me you enjoy my writing seriously puts the biggest smile on my face. enjoy another update :)

Jane could hear the chatter coming from the living room halfway down the second floor staircase. It had been almost two weeks since the incident with the diary. She was slowly but surely starting to push herself to be around Mike more. The first three days she had eaten dinner in her room and waited until he'd left for school to come down for breakfast. She figured the whole family knew what happened since no one seemed to question her sudden isolation. She had also stopped writing her letters as often as she had been. When she did she was hesitant to write too much. Despite the fact that she didn't think he would read her notebook again she was still worried about the 'what if. Though Jane was annoyingly stubborn she knew she couldn't be mad at him forever.

It was the night of the dance at his school. She hadn't planned on coming down until after he left but she couldn't help herself. As mad as she still was she didn't think she wanted to miss the opportunity to see Mike all dressed up. Plus her emotions were starting to get the better of her all by herself up in her room. She wasn't in the mood to throw herself a pity party. So she forced herself out before she could change her mind. She practically tiptoed down the stairs and did her best to go unheard just in case she changed her mind and went back upstairs. Jane paused halfway down the first floor staircase. They would all be there once she came down. She needed to collect herself a bit.

The closer the dance got the more bitter Jane became about her situation. Mike wanted to take her. He would have taken her if it was so dangerous. He didn't care what other people thought. As the dance approached she was surprised with herself at how badly she wanted to go. A boy had never liked her before. Certainly not enough to bring her to a dance and show her off and not care about how others might react to it. She wanted to go to the dance so badly her heart

hurt. But she knew she would be spending the night reading a book and trying to keep herself from wondering if he was dancing with another girl.

She descended the rest of the stairs before she could lose her courage. Nancy was the first to notice her since Mike was busy posing for a picture with his mother. She offered her an encouraging smile. Despite being Mike's sister she had seemed to take Jane's side in the whole situation. She came up and kept her company lots of times when Jane had been locked up in her room waiting for Mike to leave the room she wanted to go in. A swarm of butterflies started to settle in her stomach as she walked over and stood closely next to Nancy. She was afraid to look directly at him.

"I didn't think you would come down." Nancy whispered in her ear.

"Neither did I."

It wasn't until Ted lowered the camera that Mike noticed her standing in the room. She watched his cheeks start to turn pink when he looked at her. Jane was amazed that his suit was long enough to cover both his wrists and ankles. She wondered if it had been altered to fit him better. His hair had grown out a bit since she cut it back in August but wasn't yet long enough to cover his eyebrows. She figured by the time he needed another cut she wouldn't be mad at him anymore.

Karen fussed with his tie a bit, which only made him blush harder, before she looked over at her and Nancy. "Why don't you kids take a picture together?"

By the way Karen looked right at her Jane figured she was included in 'you kids'. She considered pointing out the fact that the Wheelers were supposed to be clueless to her existence and that taking a picture would be evidence that they were breaking the law by hiding a Jewish girl in their house. Had they all suddenly become as reckless as Mike? Instead she simply asked "Are you sure?"

She seemed to be able to read Jane's mind and know exactly what she was worried about. "One picture won't hurt." She said as she took the camera from her husband.

Yes, it could. Jane just didn't have the heart to argue.

Mike stood on the other side of Nancy (which she was thankful for) and Holly practically ran into Jane's arms. The logical and rational side of her mind told her that being in the picture was a mistake but she couldn't make herself protest. Nancy and Holly had become the sisters she'd never had. While Mike was nothing like a brother to her he was still incredibly important. She wanted photographic proof that she'd known them if anything were to happen.

Once the flash of the camera went off Karen set it down on the coffee table. "Will's mom called me the other day and said you were welcome to come over afterwards if you wanted to." She said. "Are you going to?"

Mike shrugged his thin shoulders. Jane was pretty sure he glanced her way before answering. "I don't know. Maybe." He looked over at her and Nancy. "What are you guys going to do?"

Jane hadn't planned on doing anything but her plans seemed to change when Nancy answered. "We're having a girls' night so you're not invited. You might as well go to Will's."

He rolled his eyes despite the wide smile he wore. "Yeah, alright, noted." He then turned to his parents. "Can I take the car?"

Karen and Ted glanced nervously at each other. "I don't know, Mike."

"Because I kind of already told Dustin I would pick him up."

Ted let out a sigh before reaching into his pocket and pulling out the car keys. "Straight there and straight back." He warned before handing them over. "Do *not* get pulled over."

"I won't, I won't." he said quickly as he reached for them.

"Mike seriously." Karen said in a much more serious tone than Jane was used to hearing from her. "We cannot risk you getting in trouble right now."

She watched everyone glance her way nervously. Jane felt overcome with guilt that they had to be so careful because of her. Mike held her

gaze for a moment longer than everyone else before grabbing the keys from his dad. "Yeah, I know. I got it."

He said a quick goodbye before grabbing his jacket and heading out the door. Jane couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed that she couldn't follow him out. The bitterness that had settled within her felt even more sour than usual. More than ever she wished the world was different and that she could just be a normal kid. Nancy seemed to pick up on her shift in mood by the way she put her arm around Jane's shoulders and dragged her towards the stairs. "Go put on your comfiest pajamas and meet me in my room, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

Jane ducked into the door inside the closet and dug through her drawers for the sweatpants and pullover sweatshirt she had packed. Once she changed her eyes lingered on the photo album on top of her dresser. She'd been more tempted to open than she had ever been. But she didn't think she could do it alone. If there was anyone she wanted to look at it with it was Nancy.

As she reached out towards it she, for some reason, expected it to burn her skin. But it was just a book. If anything it felt cold to the touch. She tucked it underneath her arm as she left her room and headed downstairs for Nancy's. The door was wide open and when she walked in she spotted her changing the station on the radio next to her bed. She wore a pair of shorts and a t-shirt underneath a soft looking robe.

When she spotted Jane her eyes drifted down to the album in her hand. "What's that?"

Suddenly she felt stupid for bringing it. What if she cried and ruined their girls' night in? What if Nancy thought she was being too sensitive? "It's, um, a photo album my neighbors sent over a little while ago." She answered while looking down at it. "I haven't opened it yet."

"Do you wanna look at it?" Nancy asked gently.

Jane looked back up at her. "Is that okay?"

"Yeah, of course."

Nancy sat down at the head of her bed and Jane sat next to her. She set the book down on her crossed legs. It took her a moment to gather her courage before she grabbed the cover and opened it. The first one picture was a shot of her as a baby in her mother's arms and her dad next to her. They both looked so young and happy. It was hard for Jane to remember a version of her mother when she wasn't frail and sick.

"Is that your parents?" Nancy asked as she looked over her shoulder.

Jane nodded. "My mom said I was named after Jane Eyre because she managed to overcome adversity." She looked up at Nancy with a small smile. "She was also an orphan."

She felt Nancy's hand land on her shoulder. "But you're not."

Maybe.

The first few pages were shots of her with both her parents when she was younger. She wondered if Nancy picked on her mother was all of a sudden absent from any and all pictures. Halfway through the pages were more recent pictures of her with her friends. A small smile spread on her face at a shot of a football field with a few kids blurry from running around. "This was taken the day the girls and the boys were on two separate teams and played soccer."

"Who won?"

Jane smiled even wider. "The girls."

Towards the end of the pictures they all started getting older and her friends all started wearing more make up. But not Jane. One of the last pictures in the book was a shot of her standing between her two friends. Her hair was straight and she had suffered through squeezing into a dress and putting on some makeup. "This was the last school dance I went to." She said. "This was the night that we found Rita kissing a boy in the grade above us in the hallway."

Nancy laughed and leaned in closer to get a better look at the picture. "You look so pretty." She looked up from the picture with a wide grin

on her face. "Can I do your make up?"

Jane's nose scrunched up as she closed the album and set it on the bed behind her. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Because that's what happens on a girls' night." She said as if it were completely obvious. Nancy seemed to have a very different type of girls night than Jane and her friends did. "Either that or I paint my nails."

"Make up." She answered almost immediately. It would be a lot easier to take off.

The grin on Nancy's face only widened as she pulled her to her feet and sat her down in a chair in front of her vanity. She dug through all her bottles and compacts and brushes (Jane was stunned that one person could own so much make up) and pulled out a bottle filled with a liquid that looked a little bit too light for her skin. "Can I ask you something?" she asked as she unscrewed the cap.

"Sure." Nothing good ever started with 'can I ask you something'.

Nancy poured some of the make up onto the back of her hand before putting it on Jane's cheek. It felt cold and sticky. "What did Mike read in your journal? You don't have to tell me exactly what but I get the feeling it was really bad."

Jane let out a small sigh. She reminded herself that it was Nancy. Nancy was easier to talk to than her friends usually were. She didn't tease or judge or make her feel silly for her feelings. Plus Jane had been desperate to talk about it with someone who could respond. "I wrote letters in it. To my mom and my dad and my friends."

"Oh."

She closed her eyes as Nancy started putting the makeup closer to her eyes. "He said something to me back in August that I wrote about. And he read it?"

"What did he say?"

"He was talking about the dance tonight, saying he wasn't sure if he

wanted to go." Jane said. "When I asked him why he said because there was a girl he wanted to go with but that she couldn't go."

She opened her eyes just in time to see Nancy stand up straight and shake her head. "So he finally told you?" she asked as she grabbed a compact with peach colored powder.

"What?"

Nancy smirked. "About his big fat crush on you?"

Jane felt her cheeks engulf in flames. "Well he didn't exactly say that."

She watched her smirk even wider. "It's about damn time he said something. He's been drooling over you ever since you got here." Nancy popped open the compact and grabbed a brush. "So what did he read?"

"I wrote him a letter after he said that. About how we would never work and how he should just forget about it." Her skin tickled where Nancy ran the brush over her face. "I may have said something about how I wish it would work."

Nancy raised a thin eyebrow at her. "So you like him too?"

"Yeah." She admitted a bit reluctantly. "But it would never work out. I mean, does he even realize what's going on in the world right now? What happens to people like me?"

Nancy set the compact down and picked up a mascara. She instructed Jane how to open her eyes the perfect way before responding. "He does. But Mike likes to ignore things that get in the way of the things that he wants. And I think that because he doesn't think the way everyone else does that he sometimes forgets that not everyone thinks about people like you how he does."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Well he's an idiot for thinking it would work."

"Mike is an idiot in general."

They both fell silent as Nancy picked up a tube of red lipstick. It was

a color Jane normally wouldn't be caught dead wearing. But it was girls' night. It felt good to just hang out with someone. For once she felt completely content spending the night in.

Just as Nancy finished up filling in her lips the song playing on the radio was interrupted by static. Her confusion was mirrored on the others girls face but neither of them thought much about it. Not until a man's frantic sounding voice filled up the room. "Attention, attention! There has just been a bombing on Elden Avenue. An exclusive statement from German soldiers suggest that the French are to blame for this attack."

When she looked from the radio to Nancy she immediately noticed that her face had paled and her eyes had gone wide. "What is it?"

"Mike's school is on Elden Avenue."

Both girls jumped to their feet and rushed over to the radio. Nancy turned it up to full volume and they both ignored how it distorted the audio. "We have to report on how many have been injured or killed. Our sources at the scene have said that there are several ambulances present."

Nancy's hand reached over and grabbed tightly onto hers. Without something to hold onto she might have collapsed onto the floor. The fear that had a death grip on her heart seemed to be reflected on Nancy's face. They starred at the radio until the reporter repeated the same bits of information over and over again. Still gripping tightly onto one another they hurried out of Nancy's room and down the stairs.

When they got into the living room they immediately saw Karen and Ted sitting on the couch with the radio on full blast in front of them on the coffee table. The same voice they had been listening to upstairs filled the living room. Nancy and Jane sat on the second couch across from them.

The four of them sat and listened to the radio for what felt like hours. They just kept saying the same thing. Bomb. Elden Avenue. The French are to blame. No one knows how many are hurt. Jane didn't know who was holding on tighter; her or Nancy.

"We have to go look for him." Nancy said suddenly before getting up and walking over to the coat rack next to the front door. "We can't just sit here and wait."

Karen stood up slowly and walked over just as Nancy started putting her coat on. She looked almost on the verge of tears. "Sweetie we can't." she said. Her voice came out shaky and quiet. "He took the car."

Nancy turned to face her. She wore the same determined expression she had the night that air raids came up at dinner and she asked Jane about her experience. "Then we borrow the neighbors. They'll understand."

"We can't leave Jane here by herself."

Jane wanted to scream at the to forget about her and go look for their son. She was always holding them back, she didn't think she could ever forgive herself if she held them back from saving Mike. But her voice felt as weak and scared as she did. "Just go. I'll be fine here."

Ted, who had been quiet until then, spoke up. "With a bombing so close by soldiers will be out more than usual. It's not safe for you to be here by yourself."

No one offered up any arguments and Nancy and Karen eventually came and sat back down.

Jane hadn't prayed, *seriously* prayed, in years. But with the radio on and the soft sound of Karen crying Jane clasped her hands together, pressed them against her forehead, and whispered every prayer she could remember.

9. Elden Avenue

Stepping out of the school and onto the street Mike felt as if he could breathe again. School dances were suffocating to him. There were too many people crammed into the gymnasium and it was always too hot. Even after he had taken his jacket off. The music and the chatter always made it too loud for him to even think. But the street outside was silent and crisp with mid September air. He looked over at his friend Lucas who was still wearing an ear to ear grin. A girl named Leta had asked him to dance halfway through the night and he had been beaming ever since. As he watched the pair walk onto the dance floor all Mike could think about was Jane sitting back at his house, unable to leave as always.

"It's still pretty early." Will commented once they were all outside.
"Are you guys still coming over?"

Mike looked down at the watch on his wrist. If he was to follow through with what he had planned for when he got home he couldn't stay out too late. Jane coming down before he left had been a good sign but he doubted he'd gotten back to her good graces enough to wake her up if she'd fallen asleep and get away without her getting cross with him.

On the other hand, he had been somewhat neglecting his friends lately. He was constantly terrified of mentioning Jane in front of them. She had become such an important part of his life and it was getting more and more difficult to pretend like she didn't exist. Especially when she was constantly on his mind. About an hour before they left his friends had caught Emelia Fischer smiling at him. They tried their best to convince him to ask her to dance for the better part of a half hour. Mike wanted to scream at them that he didn't give a single shit about Emilia Fischer.

He wanted to see Jane. But he already knew the rest of his friends would be going and he felt obliged to go too.

They walked about three feet before Mike recognized the sound of an airplane overhead. He barely had time to recognize the sound before, just down the street, the street exploded right before his eyes. The

impact shook the ground harder than any earthquake he could imagine. His breath left his body as his back collided with the stone sidewalk. It felt like forever that he just laid there motionless. His eyes had been blinded by the light and his ears were ringing. All of his senses had momentarily failed him.

The first to come back to him was his hearing. Screaming and the sound of rubble collapsing danced together in a haunting melody. Mike groaned softly as he pushed himself upright on his elbows and blinked until his vision returned. Down the street it looked like the world was ending. Fire reached higher than fifteen feet in the air and burned so bright it was like looking directly at the sun. Cars that had been parked close to the impact had either been knocked over or smashed by flying remains of the building that had been hit. From where he sat he could see Lucas' car laying on its side with the front windshield shattered.

People from inside the school were rushing out into the street. He felt someone grab onto his arm and start to pull onto his feet. His head started to spin as he was lifted off the ground and he had to cling onto their arm in order to keep himself upright. To make matters even worse he looked over to find Emilia Fischer standing next to him and keeping him steady. He wanted to pull away immediately but he needed her support while he stabled himself again. It was like the ground beneath him had turned into some sort of carnival ride that wouldn't stop spinning.

On the ground next to him Will was just starting to sit up and Dustin was on his knees looking over Lucas. Mike's eyes fell onto a dark maroon patch on his previously white dress shirt just on the top of his left shoulder. He wracked his brain for the memory of his friend spilling punch on himself but came up with nothing. The look on Dustin's face was enough to convince him that his first thought had been right. He had never been good with handling the sight of blood and he had to clench his jaw to keep his dinner from coming up.

Mike stumbled over to his friend and stared down at the wound on his shoulder and a broken brick laying less than a foot away from him. He leaned down and picked it up. His pointer finger landed directly on a spot with some sort of moisture. He immediately dropped it back on the ground only to find blood on his skin. It took

everything in him to not start gagging.

A pained expression was etched into Lucas' face and when he spoke Mike could just make out what he said over all the other noise. "What the hell happened?"

"A bomb went off down the road by the corner store." Dustin told him. "You got hit by something."

A small smirk appeared on Lucas' face that didn't at all match the agonized expression he had otherwise. "Too bad it wasn't you."

Mike was glad no one mentioned his car.

He had no clue how long it took the soldiers to show up. Mike hadn't bothered to check his watch. Five trucks pulled up the street with a firetruck quickly following behind. Men in uniforms hopped out of trucks and hurried over to the people scattered out in the street. Mike watched a short but buff blonde soldier heading directly over to them. He could feel his stomach falling down to his feet. He'd yet to have any interaction with a soldier since Jane moved in. It was something he was thankful for every day. He looked down at Lucas once the soldier was only a few feet away so he could avoid looking at him.

"What's happened here?" he asked. His voice was authoritative and gruff. The swastika on his uniform Mike could see out of the corner of his eye made him feel even more sick. People like him were ruining lives. Couldn't they see that? If his impulsivity had been any worse than it already was he might have hit him.

Dustin was the first to speak up. "He got hit with some sort of shrapnel." He told him. "We were out here when the bomb went off."

"It was a brick." Mike muttered and nodded down at the fragment at his feet. His eyes were fixed on the ground since he didn't dare look up.

The soldier looked from Mike, to the brick, down to Lucas. "It looked like a bomb?" he was hardly any older than they were which was a little off putting.

Will, who hadn't said a word since the bomb went off, seemed to get his voice back. "It looked like the street exploded." He said. The tone in his voice made Mike's stomach churn. Though they didn't talk about the war much they'd said enough that Mike knew Will had a distaste for the Nazi's. That distaste had been clear as day when he spoke. Mike wanted to tell him to shut up and remind him that he could get shot. "Is that what a bomb looks like?"

The blonde soldier ignored Will's obvious attitude. "Ambulances will be coming soon." He told them shortly. "I'll direct one over to you." He turned and walked down the street and Mike felt like he could once again breathe.

As they all waited silently for the ambulance Mike thought about the night he and his family had to hide out in the shed during an air raid. He remembered how scared he had been when they realized Holly wasn't there and how the feeling only got worse when Jane bolted out the doors. She had been gone way too long for his liking. His mind cursed him with images of a bomb dropping on the house with Jane and Holly inside. He remembered how he ran out of the shed after her before he could really think about what he was doing. He also remembered how angry she had looked when they made it back to the shed. Hours later she was snoring with her head on his shoulder and she didn't look so angry anymore.

He hated that something was happening again and that he couldn't be with his family. Would there be a second attack? Would it be closer to his house?

"Do you think the news has heard about all this yet?" Will asked while they waited.

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know." He admitted. His eyes did a quick survey of the street. "I don't see any reporters." There were soldiers, firemen, and civilians wearing expressions of pure horror. But no reporter.

"Good." Will said. "I don't think my mom will ever let me out of the house again if she hears about this."

It felt like they waited for the ambulances forever, but it was

probably only about ten minutes. Paramedics wielding stretchers scattered throughout the streets to find people who needed help. As promised Mike spotted the soldier they'd spoken to point some in their direction. A pair of paramedics came right over to them and lay a stretcher down on the floor next to Lucas. As they lifted him off the ground and onto the cloth they asked what had happened. The three of them followed closely behind and recapped everything from the bomb going off to Lucas' injury. They stood behind the ambulance and watched helplessly as the doors closed and their friend was driven away.

Mike had never felt more helpless in his life. He couldn't help his friend, he couldn't help his family, and he couldn't help Jane. The feeling of uselessness was even more suffocating than the dance had been. He reached up and practically ripped the knot out of his tie in hopes of breathing better. When he looked over at his friends standing next to him he could see almost everything he felt reflected in their faces.

"What do we do now?" Dustin asked as he watched the ambulance disappear around the corner at the end of the road.

No one knew the answer. With the ambulance gone the only thing there was left to look at was the building down the street. It had started to collapse and was still being eaten by flames that danced as tall as the remaining buildings next door. Some people were crying. Others simply stared, numb, like he and his friends did. He had no clue how long they all stood and looked. It was like they were all hypnotized. They couldn't look away.

The sound of car engines snapped him out of his trance. Mike turned and spotted more military trucks driving up the street towards them. His stomach felt sour as he stared at the people who were responsible for turning Jane's life into a living hell. They were the reason why she couldn't leave the house and why her father and friends were all taken from her. They were the reason she couldn't go to the dance with him. But without them he never would have met her.

Will's eyes narrowed slightly at the sight of the newly arrived soldiers. He then took the words right out of his mouth. "Let's get out of here."

They all hurried back to Mike's car and avoided looking at the men in uniforms who passed by them. It wasn't until he got into the driver's seat and closed the door that he felt like he could really breathe. It probably helped that the air inside his car wasn't polluted with ashes. His fingers shook a bit as he put the keys in the ignition. The one thing Mike was glad about was that the car hadn't been damaged. Otherwise he might have had yet another near death experience. He swerved through the cars that packed the street and made it difficult to get out. Mike drove towards Dustin's house since he lived the closest to the school out of them all.

"You guys look like shit." His curly haired friend commented.

Both Mike and Will laughed shortly. Leave it to Dustin to try and break the tension. He looked over at his friends faces, both covered in black soot with small scrapes scattered across their skin, and figured he probably looked just about as crappy as they both did.

The farther they drove from the school the more he was able to relax. He had once thought that the night of the air raid had been the scariest night of his life. That was nothing compared to what he had just experienced. But he focused on his driving and got away as fast as he could without risking being pulled over. When they reached Dustin's house Mike put the car into park and waited until he was inside before starting it up again. As he pulled out of the driveway he could feel Will watching him closely, but he pretended not to notice. A few blocks away his friend finally spoke up. "You okay?" he asked

Mike shrugged. "Yeah, I guess." He said. He felt like a total wreck and that any minute his body would fail him and completely shut down. But he knew that Lucas probably felt a hell of a lot worse than he did so he figured it wasn't worth mentioning. "What about you?"

"Yeah." Will answered. "You know, you seem different lately."

He was thankful he had to focus on the road. Even if he could have he didn't think he would be able to look at Will directly. He felt the beginning of an interrogation coming. "What do you mean?"

Will fell silent for a moment as he thought. "I don't know. You're quieter lately. I feel like I haven't seen you in forever."

"I, um...." How the hell was he supposed to explain his sudden change? He hated lying to his friends but he knew he couldn't tell the truth. If he ever did anything to threaten Jane's safety she would probably kick his ass before being dragged out the door. "I'm just tired of this stupid war."

They were both quiet for the remainder of the ride. Will lived only five minutes away from his own house. Every other summer they practically spent every day together. But with Jane in the house he felt like he had a panic attack every minute someone from outside the family came inside. He didn't invite anyone over for the same reason why he was afraid to say much; what if he slipped up and spilled the secret?

Mike pulled into Will's driveway and put the car into park but his friend didn't move. He could feel his eyes on him as he leaned back against the seat. Knowing that his family was five minutes away left him feeling antsy and eager to get home. But he didn't want to push his friend. So he waited silently for him to do something.

"You know," Will said after a few moments had passed. He spoke slowly and kept his eyes fixed on Mike. He didn't dare to look back at him. "I think my cousin is hiding someone."

Mike felt as if all the blood drained from his body. His hands gripped onto the steering wheel so tight that his knuckles had started to turn white but he couldn't let go. It felt like the months he'd been trying to keep Jane a secret had all been for nothing. Even if he didn't tell Will he would still be suspicious. Suspicion had become a deadly thing over the past couple of years. If there was anyone out of his friends that would have figured it out it would have been Will. He had just hoped the war would end before he did.

He couldn't bring himself to respond so Will kept going. "They used to invite us over all the time but now we hardly go over there. And when we do the whole family is on edge. I know that they're trying to hide it so I haven't brought it up." He turned in his seat a bit to face him. "If there's something that you want to, you know, tell me I wouldn't say anything to anyone."

Mike felt his mouth go dry. He knew that he and Will felt the same

way about the war and the Nazi's but could he trust him with something like that? He'd been trying for weeks to prove to Jane that she could trust him. But telling someone about her was the least trustworthy thing he could do. His eyes shut tight and he rested the back of his head on the headrest. Everything in his mind screamed at him not to but he could feel the words on the tip of his tongue. "I can't." Was all he could manage to say.

"Yes, you can." Will said. He could feel his eyes burning holes into the side of his face. "I wouldn't say anything. Not to my family or to Dustin and Lucas. But you're kind of a mess lately because you're keeping all this in. If you keep falling apart everyone's going to figure it out." As usual, his friend had a point. It was something he and Jane had in common; their ability to be annoyingly right. They would have gotten along. Mike opened his eyes and looked at his friend in his peripheral vision. "What's their name?"

Trying to convince his friend otherwise was not an option. He knew. It was just a matter of confirming it.

He thought about all the times he wished he could talk about Jane. How he knew that his friends would like her if they ever got the chance to meet her. And how when everything happened with the diary he'd so desperately wanted to ask his friends for advice. She was a remarkable person and pretending like she didn't exist was slowly eating away at him and left him feeling rotten inside. Now that he was presented with the opportunity to talk about her he was terrified. He felt like he was betraying her all over again.

But Mike felt like he was going to explode. Someone needed to know about her. Jane was not someone that deserved to be kept a secret. She was someone that should be celebrated and loved and looked after by everyone that knew her. Mike felt his throat start to burn but did his best to ignore it.

"Her name is Jane." He managed to choke out.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Will's face break out into a large grin. "I knew it was a girl."

He could feel his lips twitched upwards. The same way Jane did back

when she was too stubborn and too taken over by grief to even let herself smile. Mike looked over at him. "How'd you know?"

"Because Emilia Fischer is one of the prettiest girls in school and you wouldn't even look at her. I knew there had to be someone else." Will said. Mike's microscopic smile grew twice its size. Maybe he should have danced with Emilia just so his friends would have gotten on his case. If he had Will might not have figured it out. "You're totally in love with her, aren't you?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Mike admitted. "But I kind of messed everything up."

Will's eyebrows pulled together. "How?"

He went through everything that had happened since he read Jane's diary. Mike told him about how surprised he'd been by what she had written about him and how for the next couple of weeks he struggled to act normal with the knowledge that Jane was beating herself up so badly just for having a crush. When he told him about how angry she had gotten when she found out he felt his throat once again start to get tight and sore feeling.

"I think she hates me." He said once he was done.

Will shook his head. "She doesn't hate you." He told him. "But try and see where she's coming from. She's probably pushing you away because she cares about you and doesn't want anything to happen to you. I bet she'd be a worried mess right now if she knew what had just happened."

Mike's smile once again returned. It would be a nice change for her to worry about him instead of him worrying about her 24 hours a day, seven days a week. "It's all just so unfair." He said. "She's probably the most incredible person I know and everything's been taken away from her. Her friends, her family, her house, and even her freedom. I can't think about it too much because it just pisses me off."

Will nodded a few times. "What's your favorite thing about her?"

How was he just supposed to pick one thing? There were a thousand

things about Jane that he adored. How she had so easily become part of the family, how she ignored most social expectations for girls and didn't think twice, how he caught her smiling as she read a book she enjoyed when she didn't think anyone was watching. Picking just one thing seemed impossible. He had to take a moment to think.

"She's not the best at expressing her emotions with words." Mike said after a minute or two had passed. "I think she's scared that if she talks about what's going on in her head she'll fall apart. But she doesn't need to say anything. What she does and her body language is clear enough." He looked over at Will. "Remember that air raid a couple months back?"

"Yeah."

"She'd been living with us for almost three weeks when it happened." He said. "We were all in the shed but Holly wasn't there. So Jane ran inside the house to go get her. She'd only known us for three weeks and she was risking her life to save her."

Will's eyebrows climbed up his forehead. "Wow."

Mike nodded in agreement. "I went after her. You know what she did?"

"What?"

"She yelled at me." Mike remembered how angry she had been. Despite how small and short she was she was scary when she got angry. It was just another thing about her he liked. "I don't think she knew what to do with the thought that someone cared about her."

Will smiled a little bit. "You know, even after the war is over there's still going to be people who are prejudice. Not everyone is going to be as nice to her as you are. And people will give you shit for it." Will raised an eyebrow at him. "Is she worth everything you're going to have to go through?"

"Absolutely." Mike said without a second's hesitation.

Will nodded and unbuckled his seat belt. "Good." He grabbed the door handle and pushed it open. Once he got back out of the car he

turned back to Mike. "Then go get her."

Will flashed him one last smile before shutting the door and heading up the walkway. This time Mike didn't wait until his friend was inside the house before he backed out of the driveway and onto the street. As he drove back to his house his heart was still pounding. There was absolutely no way he could tell his family what he'd just told Will. As long as he trusted his friend would keep the secret there was no point in worrying them. If it was anyone else he might have been more worried.

As soon as his car was in front of his house he ripped his keys out of the ignition and threw his car door open. He could see the lights in the house still on despite the late hour. Had his family somehow heard about what had happened? Did Dustin's family call his and let them know about the bombing? He hoped they hadn't known for too long so that they didn't have to worry too much.

Mike stumbled in through the front door only to find everyone waiting for him inside. Almost immediately after stepping in the house his mom wrapped him up in a bone crushing hug that threatened to choke the life out of him. Over her shoulder his eyes searched the room for Jane. She stood behind Nancy with her arms wrapped around herself and black flakes of mascara running down her cheeks. The relief he felt every time he came home and saw that she was still there was ten times as strong as it normally was.

Everyone came over and hugged him but Jane didn't move an inch. Her eyes, as wide as saucers, followed him as he walked over to her. Mike wished that he could take away all the pain she had felt over the past few months so that she was the happy girl she deserved to be. Once he stood in front of her his hands were itching to reach out and touch her. Sometimes he didn't think she was real and wondered if his mind had created her in some elaborate dream he would eventually wake up from. She just seemed too good to be true.

Remnants of her and Nancy's girls' night remained only in mascara that had been cried off and lipstick that was smudged. Yet, somehow, she was still the most beautiful person he'd ever seen in his life. "Are you wearing makeup?"

"Yeah." Her voice was strained and quiet. How long had they known about what happened? Had she been waiting there for him the whole time?

Mike's face broke out into a smile. He wished he'd gotten the opportunity to see her before she cried it all off. Jane and makeup were two ideas that had never gone together in his imagination. "It looks good."

She let out the most heartbreakingly laugh Mike had ever heard in his life. He clenched his fists at his sides to keep from reaching out to her. Last time he checked she was still mad at him. "No it doesn't."

In an instant a miracle happened. Jane's arms wrapped around his waist and clung to him for dear life, and he could feel her cheek resting against his chest. Something about hugging Jane was so much better when she reached for him first. The way she held him made him feel like she needed him the way he needed her. There was no better feeling in the world. He wanted to hold onto her forever, but he would settle for a few minutes.

10. Soot Covered Freckles

thanks once again to everyone that's been reading this story and an extra special thanks to everyone who typically don't read holocaust stories. I'm glad mine is good enough to be an exception, I'll try not to let you guys down! enjoy another update (which I'm super excited for)

The sun had set hours ago but the only one who managed to fall asleep was Holly. She was curled up on the couch and snored softly through the radio blaring at full volume. Jane figured she didn't fully understand what was going on. If she had she would have been a crying mess. In a way it was better that she had no clue what was going on. Holly crying would have just been another added stressor for everyone. At least someone could relax.

Each of them were a nervous wreck. Ted kept removing his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose. Karen kept getting up and grabbing more napkins to blow her nose in. Nancy went back and forth between sitting on the couch and on the windowsill. Jane's leg bounced up and down as she whispered prayers on repeat.

Mike had to be fine. Her brain refused to admit anything else. She hadn't officially forgiven him yet. At least not to his face. She'd never admitted how she felt directly to him. There were a thousand things she wanted to say to him and she would not allow not having the opportunity to say them to be a possibility that entered her mind. Jane could feel the makeup that had run down her cheeks with her tears drying. Of course the first night she'd worn make up in over a year was the same night that she was a crying mess.

The longer they waited the more Jane felt like she might be sick. But she was terrified of leaving the room and missing something. So she kept her jaw clenched tight to keep everything down. When the clock in the room played a small melody indicating that it was midnight Jane felt a new wave of tears wash over her. Mike had left at 8. They'd heard the first report at 9:30. He shouldn't have been gone so long.

She never imagined she'd been openly weeping in front of the whole family. Well, almost the whole family. But she felt as if she'd finally reached her breaking point. Mike had been nothing but good to her. Even when he completely violated her privacy it was because he just wanted to understand her better. He saw her in a way no one ever had. He came after her during an air raid. She never even said thank you.

For the dozenth time she learned a lesson she wished she could forget. That you never knew how much you really cared about someone until you were faced with the possibility of losing them. She learned it when her mother got sick and she learned it again when her friends and father got taken away. So many people she cared about had been stolen from her. Just once she needed the universe to cut her some slack.

She heard the sound of a car door outside the house and felt her heart jump into her throat. Was it a soldier coming to inform them of news no one wanted to hear? Was it a neighbor coming to comfort them? They all seemed to hear it and jump to their feet. Jane knew she should have hidden somewhere in the house but her feet wouldn't budge. She was stuck in the spot she stood in and didn't think she could ever move.

The door flew open and she heard Nancy let out something in between a gasp and a cry. Jane only managed to catch a glimpse of Mike before his mom ran over and threw her arms around him in a bone crushing hug. His hair was a mess, standing out in all different directions, and his face was covered in what looked like soot. When Karen finally let go of him she saw that his once white dress shirt was now grey and dirty. Nancy was the next to hug him, then Ted. Jane stayed put in the same spot. Though she wouldn't have admitted it she was afraid he would disappear if she went over and tried to touch him.

Once his father let him go Mike's eyes landed on her. She wished she was better at reading people because she would have loved to know what the look on his face meant. He did her the favor of walking over to her so that she didn't have to move. As he got closer she could feel her knees start to shake and her bottom lip start to tremble. He stood only inches away from her, towering over her as always, and started

to smile.

"Are you wearing makeup?" he asked

Jane managed to choke out a response, which was shocking. He'd just been at a bombing and was talking about her makeup. It was one of the most Mike things he could say. "Yeah."

His smile widened even more. "It looks good."

She let out a laugh that sounded more like a cry. Jane could feel the mascara on her cheeks and the back of her hands were covered in lipstick smears. She probably looked just as much of a mess as he did, just in a different way. The two of them were certainly a sight. "No it doesn't."

Before she could stop herself her arms wrapped around his waist and her head rested against his chest. She could feel him hugging her tightly before she even finished latching onto him. Her body started to shake as she let herself start to cry all over again. If his shirt wasn't already ruined she would have worried about getting the last bit of mascara she had on his shirt. He smelled like smoke and the last little bit of cologne that remained and clung to him for dear life.

One of his hands rubbed circles on her back. The rest of the room and everyone else in it seemed to disappear. Relief made her feel weak and she held tightly onto him so she wouldn't collapse onto the floor. The world had taken so many things away from her. Not just the people she loved but her school, her home, her *freedom*. But it hadn't taken Mike.

It felt like an eternity before she let go of him. He sat in between her and Nancy while Karen and Ted pulled up chairs so they could be nearby. Jane couldn't get close enough to him. In contrast to before she now felt like he would disappear if she let go of him. He told them about what had happened. Apparently he and his friends had just been leaving to go to Will's house when the bomb hit a convenience store down the road. One of them had been taken to the hospital. He didn't look too hurt but a brick from the building had hit him in the shoulder. Since his other friends had been parked closer to the store their car had been destroyed so he had to drive both Will

and Dustin home.

"Just before we left more soldiers started showing up." He said. "So we got the hell out of there."

After he told them the story twice he then tried to convince everyone that he was fine. Though his words did little to ease the anxiety they all felt it helped that the only sign of injury he had was a scratch on his cheekbone. They all sat in the living room listening to him for almost an hour before Mike got up to change out of his clothes and wash his face. Jane figured she should do the same.

She closed the first floor bathroom door behind her and let out a long shaky sigh. He was okay. He was *okay*. Jane scrubbed the remaining makeup off her face until her skin was red and splotchy looking, and not just from all the crying. Even with a clean face she looked like a total disaster. Her eyes were red and bloodshot and heavy shadows had settled in underneath and made themselves nice and comfortable. Once she was done she stared at herself in the mirror.

What the hell did he see in her? She had yet to figure it out.

After a bit more crying she finally emerged from the bathroom. The rest of the family seemed to have gone up to their rooms since the living room was empty. Jane's adrenaline finally started to calm down enough that she could breathe normally again. Part of her couldn't wait to crawl into bed. The other part of her was nervous about what dreams she would be met with that night. She gripped tightly onto the railing as she climbed up the stairs.

When she reached the second floor she spotted the open bathroom door down the hall. The light was on and she could hear the sink running even from where she stood. The floor creaked gently under her feet as she walked over. A few feet away from the door she could see Mike in sweatpants and a t-shirt that hung loosely off his shoulders. He stood in front of the sink and was scrubbing his face with a wash cloth. She leaned on the doorframe once she finally reached him.

Only a few moments later Mike spotted her in the reflection of the mirror and his lips quickly turned up in a smile. "Hey."

"Hey."

He squeezed the washcloth out under the running water. Jane watched grey water pour out from the cloth and disappear down the drain. "So," he said as he brought it back up to his face and pushed his hair back so he could wash off his forehead. "You were worried about me?"

Jane rolled her eyes. "Yeah." She admitted. In all her worry she had momentarily forgotten how annoying he could be sometimes. "We all were."

"I knew they would be worried about me." Mike said. "It was you I wasn't sure about."

She resisted the urge to punch his arm. She'd also forgotten how much of a smart ass he was. "Just because I was mad at you doesn't mean I don't care about you."

His eyes met her in the reflection of the mirror and his smile grew. "Was mad at me?"

"Yeah. Was." Jane walked into the bathroom and leaned on the counter next to him. She grabbed another wash cloth and ran it under the water. Her cheeks were already starting to go warm but she ignored the feeling. "I thought that you weren't going to come back for a second."

Mike glanced down at her for a second before looking back at his reflection. "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

Jane grabbed his arm and pushed him towards the toilet. "Sit." She said simply. He didn't offer up much protest as he set down the cloth and did as he was told. There was still a thin layer of soot on his face dark enough to cover up his freckles. She stood close enough that their knees pressed together the same way she had when she cut his hair. Only this time her heart was beating a mile a minute.

"Is that what it's like?" he asked as she started rubbing the cloth against his cheeks. "In the city where it gets bombed more often."

"I don't know." Jane admitted. "I've never been that close to one

before."

Silence fell over them and her mind forced her to imagine what it was like. To be so close to a bomb. To see a friend taken away to the hospital because of it. To see the destruction and devastation firsthand and in real time. She wished she could reach into Mike's mind and take the memories out so there was a perfect gap in between when he'd been at the dance and when he'd gotten home. It had been frustrating when he didn't understand what it was like but now she was desperate for him to return to his ignorance.

"Did you have fun at the dance?" Jane asked when she couldn't take the silence anymore. She needed to hear his voice as much as possible.

He shrugged, making the collar of his shirt fall farther down. If she didn't see how much he ate at meals she might have been concerned about him he was so skinny. "It was alright."

Jane cracked a small smile. "Did you dance with any cute girls?" It was the best attempt at a joke she could manage.

She figured it was better a better attempt than she thought it had been when he smiled back at her. "No." he told her. "There was no one there I wanted to dance with."

Jane turned just enough to run the cloth under the water. She then grabbed a clean one to dry his face off. "Sounds like a sucky night."

He smiled a little wider and she couldn't stop herself from copying him. "I had something planned for when I got home but it kind of got ruined. It got too late. Plus the whole bombing thing probably killed the mood."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Oh yeah?" she asked. "And what did you have planned?"

"I was gonna bring the radio into the library." Mike said. "And I was going to ask Nancy to bring you down because I figured you wouldn't come if I asked. Especially if I had to wake you up."

Jane let her hand drop down to her side and felt yet another wave of

tears wash over her. He was too good for her. She felt bad that he was wasting his feelings on her when he could have fallen for any number of girls at his school. As much as she wanted to push him away in hopes that he would get over it she didn't think she had it in her after such a scare. Now that she knew just how badly she wanted him she didn't think she could ignore it. Mike's eyebrows pulled together on his forehead when he saw the tears forming in her eyes.

"Hey," he said before getting to his feet and taking the cloth from her hand. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is that you're stupidly optimistic." She said. The first tear escaped and rolled down her cheek and Mike instantly wiped it away with his thumb. "I want for things to work so badly but I just know that they won't."

His hand lingered on her cheek and she didn't try to push him away. "How do you know that?"

Jane let out a humorless laugh. "Look at you and look at me, Mike." She said. "Pretty much everyone in the country wants me and everyone like me dead. I can't leave the house until the war is over, if it'll ever even be over. Nothing about us could be normal."

"Normal is boring."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Normal is safe. And you deserve to be safe."

Mike sighed and moved his hand to hold onto hers. "Look, I know that you're too stubborn to listen to anything that I have to say so I won't try. But you can't shut me out because you think it's what's best for me. Let me be stupid, okay?"

Jane couldn't keep herself from smiling. "Yeah, okay." She said. Jane wiped away the remaining tears from her face and looked up at him. "Can we hang out for a little bit? I don't wanna go upstairs yet."

"Yeah, of course."

Mike held onto her hand as he headed for his bedroom down the hall. Jane hadn't been in his room in over a month and this time felt very

different. She forced herself the push down the nervousness that started developing the closer they got to his room. She would go upstairs in a little while. But for now she was terrified of being separated from him.

As he sat down on the edge of the bed she looked over at the clock on the wall. It was just past 1:30 AM. She was thankful it was a Friday night and that he wouldn't have to wake up early in the morning for school. "Are you tired?" she asked when she looked back at him.

Mike shrugged. "Yeah. A little." He admitted. "Are you?"

"Not really." She said as she sat down next to him. "You should lay down. I'll leave when you fall asleep."

When he hesitated she thought he was going to protest and try and stay awake. But after a few seconds passed he moved behind her and lay on his back. After the night he'd had she was amazed he hadn't already crashed. Jane kicked off her slippers and lay down on her side facing him. A wide smile had spread on his face before her head hit the pillow.

"Wow," he said as he wrapped an arm around her waist. "You must have been really worried."

Jane rolled her eyes at him. "Yeah. I was." She moved to rest her head on his chest so that he wouldn't see her face getting red. "I thought I was never going to see you again." Admitting it out loud made her mouth taste bitter. "And I felt stupid for still being mad at you."

"You shouldn't feel stupid." He said almost immediately. "You didn't know what was going to happen."

She let out a small sigh. Though his words made her feel a little better she still felt guilty. She imagined Mike at the dance with his mind stuck on a girl who couldn't leave the house. Jane didn't understand what he saw in her that was so amazing that he was ready to put himself in harms way just to be with her. She looked up at him with her eyebrows knit together. "Do you really not care what people would think?"

"I really don't." Mike said. "People already tease me and my friends. I think I can handle it."

"It would be more than just teasing."

"I can handle it."

Jane propped herself up on her elbow so she could look at him better. For months she'd been asking for the universe to give her a break and let her have at least one good thing in her life. Now that she had that one good thing she was terrified. She knew that if they were together she would experience the same fear she had that night as she waited for him to come home even more in the future. It would put him in more danger than he was already in with her living in his house. She wanted to protect him.

But she wanted him so badly. Her feelings for him were foreign and scary but exciting none the less. The way he felt about her, and how he hardly bothered trying to hide it, was something she'd never experienced before. No one ever looked at her the way Mike did. Even half asleep and still smelling like smoke he looked at her like she was something special. She couldn't help but feel a little bit special when he smiled at her.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked. His eyes were barely open and his voice was quiet and mumbled.

"I'm scared."

She watched him struggle to open his eyes fully. "That's okay. I'll still be here when you're not scared anymore." His hand that wasn't resting on her waist wrapped around hers. She had to admit that their hands looked good together. "The war isn't going to last forever, you know. It's going to end eventually. Things will go back to normal." He squeezed her hand lightly. "I'm way too crazy about you to just give up."

Jane could feel her face break out into a smile all on its own. It was hard to not believe him when he sounded so confident. He should have thought about perusing a career as some sort of motivational speaker. "I think you're just as stubborn as I am."

Mike hummed softly, "I prefer the word optimistic."

She liked him so much it made her heart hurt. It would be easy to just give it up and let herself be with him. She was more tempted to give in than ever. "What are you thinking about?" Jane asked, curious about what would be on his mind after the night he'd had.

"I'm thinking that it really sucks I didn't come home early enough to set everything up in the library." He said. "Because I was going to kiss you if you stayed."

Jane felt her heart stop for a second before it started pounding like a hammer in her chest. No one had ever liked her before let alone wanted to *kiss* her. As much as she tried to stop herself her eyes kept trailing down to his lips. The more he spoke the closer she came to giving into his stupidly optimistic fantasy. They were treading into dangerous territory and Jane didn't know how to turn around and run away. She didn't even know if she wanted to bother running anymore.

Mike sat up and leaned against the headboard behind him. "Should I not have said that?"

She shook her head. "No, no, it's okay." She said quickly. "It's just... I'm really not used to someone being interested in me. Like at all."

He smiled a little bit wider. "You should start getting used to it."

Jane's eyes once again trailed down. The night was full of things she wasn't used to doing. Crying in front of people, being honest about her feelings (as best as she could), praying. What was the harm in one more first?

Her eyes fluttered shut as she leaned towards him and pressed her lips against his. The second she touched him she could feel fireworks going off inside her. Every cell in her body started going out of control and short circuiting. Suddenly she was wide awake and had the energy to run a marathon. She wanted to announce to the world that she kissed Mike Wheeler. And that he kissed her back.

Their lips moved perfectly synchronized like they had been practicing

for weeks. A small chill went down her spine when she felt one of his hands rest on the back of her neck under her hair. She wanted to kiss him until the war over. Then, when it was safe, she would drag him out in the middle of the road and kiss him in front of the whole neighborhood. With her lips pressed against his she realized she was the stupid one for resisting her feelings for him for so long.

When they pulled away from one another to catch their breath she rested her forehead against his. Jane felt as if the floodgates had opened and she would never be able to go another day without kissing him. She could feel him start to smile under the hand she had on his cheek. "You're shaking." He said

Jane leaned back and held up one of her hands. Her fingers and hands looked about as out of control and wild as she felt. Jane had been focused on what his lips felt like to feel anything else. Now that they were separated she could feel her whole body practically vibrating. The realization made her cheeks flare up immediately. She clenched her fist in hopes of making herself be still. "Shut up." She said halfheartedly. "Shouldn't you be sleeping by now?"

"Well, now I'm wide awake." Mike said. The freckles on his cheeks were faded by a heavy coat of blush. "You still going to stay until I fall asleep? It might take a while."

"I'm staying."

Mike grinned at her and leaned towards her. Their lips fit together like two puzzle pieces that created a picture all on their own. The feeling of his hand sliding onto the back of her neck sent a chill down her spine. Suddenly the way Gwen used to constantly be drooling over boys made complete sense to her. She would have gladly stayed up all night if it meant she got to keep kissing him.

11. The Morning After

whops sorry I went a second without updating, but I'm back. I'm also sorry to say that the story will be winding down soon (only about four chapters left). But for now enjoy this update :)

The sunlight pouring in through the window made Jane's eyes burn before she even opened them. It was much brighter than it normally was in her room in the morning. Maybe the sun and the earth were perfectly aligned just to get into her eye. Her head started pounding as soon as she started to drift back into consciousness. It definitely helped her feel better that her bed was comfier than usual. She wanted to pull the blankets over her head and go back to sleep but she was too tired to move an inch.

Memories of the night came flooding back to her like a tidal wave. Her eyes flew open and quickly did a once over of the room. Mike's room. Jane felt her cheeks getting warm as she realized she must have fallen asleep before she had the chance to go back up to her room. Jane forced herself up and on to her elbows. She must have crashed somewhere around 3 AM. After the night she had 'crashed' seemed like the right word. Once the adrenaline wore off she couldn't have been awake for very long.

Her eyes landed on Mike sitting up next to her. His legs were pulled close to his chest and his chin rested on one of his knees. He stared at a spot on the wall in front of him but his eyes were hazy and far away looking. Even though he wasn't facing her she could already see that dark circles had settled underneath his eyes. Worry quickly woke her right up.

Jane pushed herself upright and gently placed her hand on his shoulder. His eyes remained fixed on nothing just a second too long. She only had time to worry for a few moments before he blinked a couple of times and turned his head to look at her. Everything in his face changed in an instant back to the Mike she was used to.

Her eyes landed on the shadows under his eyes that were darker than she had expected them to be. She felt her eyebrows pull towards one

another. "How long have you been up?" she asked

Mike shrugged. "I don't know. A while." A smile spread on his face. "Thank you for staying with me. It helped a lot."

She grinned back at him. His smile was like a contagious disease powerful enough to dominate her stubbornness. "I don't think I could have left if you wanted me to."

He wrapped his arm around her waist and kissed the side of her head. "You snore a little bit, you know."

Jane bumped her shoulder against his. "Shut up." She said. Jane rested her head on his shoulder and put one of her arms around his waist. Though she no longer felt controlled by her worries of losing him and how convincing his words were she, surprisingly, didn't feel as frightened as she thought she would. It was hard to be scared of the 'what ifs' when he held onto her so gently and smiled at her as brightly as the sun that leaked in through the window across the room.

It was late. She could tell by how low the sun was and how it had already warmed up the room. Jane groaned softly and picked her head back up. "I have to go get dressed." She said as she moved towards the edge of the bed. Her skin felt cold where he had once been and she resisted the urge to crawl back into his arms.

"Why, you going somewhere?"

She shot him a weak glare as she got to her feet and put her slippers back on, but he only smiled back at her. "I'll be down in a second." Jane said and started for the door. "Do not eat all of the eggs again."

Mike rolled his eyes and started to push himself off the bed. "I'll consider myself warned." His voice was heavy with sarcasm.

She shook her head as she headed for the stairs. As she walked to her room she replayed the night over and over again in her mind. Air raids were nothing compared to the hours she had spent worrying that Mike would never come home. She hadn't been so scared since her mother got sick. It was the waiting that had the biggest effect on

her. Waiting for the sickness to take over her body. Waiting for the sound of the sirens to die down. Waiting for Mike to walk through the front door.

Jane pulled her sweatshirt over her head. Mascara mixed tears were littered across the fabric and the smell of smoke had transferred onto her throughout the night. She tossed her clothes into the laundry hamper and pulled out clean ones from her dresser. Jane knew she must have lost weight since moving in because Nancy's hand-me-downs fit her better than her own clothes. After brushing out the knots in her hair she ducked out of the closet and out into the nursery. Just as she reached the staircase she heard the doorbell echoing throughout the house.

Her heart stopped immediately. Every muscle in her body froze when she heard footsteps on the first floor followed by the sound of the door being opened. Were they supposed to have company? Was a friend of Mike's coming to check on him?

She listened as hard as she could. She didn't move a muscle and held her breath so she could hear better. Jane just managed to make out Karen's voice from up on the third floor. "Oh, hello officers. What can I do for you?"

Officers.

"We heard that your son was at the bombing last night." She heard a man's voice say. His voice sounded like it belonged to someone as tall as Mike and as buff as her dad. And a lot meaner than both of them. "We're trying to interview everyone who was there so we can figure out exactly what happened. It's routine, I hope you understand."

Jane turned around and tiptoed back to her room as she heard Karen call for Mike up the stairs. She closed the nursery door behind her and hurried into the closet. Though the door to her room blended into the wall perfectly (there was no handle, all someone had to do to open it was push) she still closed the closet doors. Once she was inside her room she went over to the other side of her bed and slid down to the floor. There was just enough space between her bed and the wall for her to fit.

Then she waited.

She focused on her breathing as she watched the minute hand on the clock spin around. Five minutes went by, then ten. The more time that passed without someone coming up to get her the more nervous she got. What the hell was taking so long?

Jane felt her chest tightening until she couldn't breathe at the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. Two pairs of footsteps. She pulled her legs up to her chest and hid her head between her knees. They were going to find her. They were going to take her. It was only hours after Mike had convinced her that he was going to keep her safe and what she had been dreading was going to happen.

She forced herself not to cry so she could stay silent. Had her dad hid when they came for him? Had Gwen or Rita? Did they even have the time to try and hide? Jane had seen people get taken before. A family down the street from her house had been dragged out of their house a few years back. They had a son a year or two younger than she was. He had elbowed one of the soldiers in the stomach and tried to get to his mother. They knocked him out cold with their gun. Would they do that to her when she tried to get to Mike?

When she heard the nursery door open the only thing she could think of to make herself feel better was the thought that she might be reunited with someone she knew when they took her away. Maybe she'd be taken to the same place as her neighbors and she and the boy could exchange stories of how they tried to fight back. The moments that followed the nursery door opening were deafening. She just wanted to get it over with.

She jumped at the sound of the soldiers' voice so close to her room. He must have been standing in the middle of the nursery. "Sorry to inconvenience you like this, Mrs. Wheeler." She could hear him say. His voice made her feel angry and frightened all at the same time. "But it's routine for us to check houses. Just in case"

"Oh, that's no problem." Karen replied brightly. She sounded like a good actress. "We have nothing to hide. If that's all you need I'll show you downstairs."

Their footsteps retreated out of the room and got softer and softer until they disappeared entirely. But even after they were gone Jane didn't dare move an inch. At any moment the solider could turn around and decide to open the closet. She squeezed her eyes shut as tight as she could with her head still in her knees and waited.

And waited some more.

She had no idea how much time had passed when she heard footsteps running up the staircase and towards her room. Two minutes? Three, five? Her whole body clenched the same way it had when she heard the solider coming up. What if someone let it slip at the last second and he was coming back up to get her? Jane's heart stopped when she heard the nursery door fly open and slam against the wall. She might have only had a few seconds left.

"Jane?"

She picked her head up just in time to see Mike burst through the door. His eyes frantically searched the room for her until he spotted her hiding spot. Jane didn't get the chance to try and stand before he came over and knelt down in front of her. She couldn't hold back her tears as she threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck.

Mike sat down on the floor next to her and locked his arms around her waist. "Hey, it's okay." He whispered in her ear. "He's gone now. It's okay."

"I thought they were going to take me." She cried. Her voice was muffled in his neck and she knew her tears would soak the collar of his shirt in no time. But she was too afraid to pull away.

He started to rub her back gently. He no longer smelled like smoke, which was a relief. "That's never going to happen. Look at me, Jane." She picked her head up just enough to meet his gaze before his hands moved to hold her face. "I will never let them take you away from us."

She felt her bottom lip start to tremble. He sounded so sure. It was usually so hard to not believe him just a little bit but for once she

wasn't convinced. A solider had come into the *house*. What was Mike going to do if it happened again? Fight a Nazi? Her fate would be decided the second someone found her. It was just a matter of how long she survived afterwards. Jane just didn't have the heart to tell Mike how wrong he was. Especially because she wanted so badly to believe him.

They sat on the floor for almost 20 minutes before Jane felt ready to leave. He didn't try to rush her or try to convince her it was safe. He let her take all the time she needed. Once she got to her feet Mike held tightly onto her hand as she walked out of the nursery and down the hall. Her legs felt shaky and she kept expecting the solider to pop out of nowhere and take her away. She held onto his hand so hard that she was surprised he didn't complain.

The whole family was sitting in the living room when they got downstairs. Under different circumstances she might have let go of his hand and gotten embarrassed. But she didn't dare let go of him for a second. Holly sat on the couch with little tears running down her cheeks. When she saw them walk in the room her face lit up and she quickly hopped off the couch and ran over to her. She wrapped her arms tightly around Jane's leg. "I was so scared that he was going to find you." Holly said in between sniffles.

Jane bent down and picked her up. Her little arms then clamped around her neck. "Well you don't have to worry about that anymore. He's gone and I'm still here, right?" She rubbed Holly's back as she rested her head on Jane's shoulder.

She could feel Holly nodding. "Mike looked so scared I thought he was going to throw up." She said.

Jane immediately looked over at him while one of her eyebrows raised high on her forehead. "Did he, now?" she asked

A light coat of blush rose to his cheeks. "I think she's being a little dramatic." He mumbled.

"Yeah, sure." She said as she walked over to the couch and sat down. Holly stayed curled up on her lap and her sniffles slowly became less and less frequent. Mike came over and sat in the spot next to her.

Ted and Karen sat in the couch across from them while Nancy sat in one of the chairs. Karen, who was still wearing her apron, let out a sigh. "Thank god you were already upstairs." She said. "I was afraid you would still be asleep."

"I'd only been awake for five minutes at the most." Jane told her. The possibility hadn't even occurred to her that she might have slept through the soldiers arrival. What if she had still been in Mike's room when he showed up? The thought made her cheeks flush. Getting taken away would have been bad enough if she hadn't just been caught in bed with a boy. "Do you think another one will show up?"

Ted sighed and pushed his glasses higher up on his nose. "I'm not sure." He admitted. "The school is a relatively short drive from here. Less than half an hour. Not to mention the bomb that went off less than a mile away back in May, too. It's hard to say." He must have picked up her nervousness because he quickly added "But may be worrying for nothing. They probably have better things to worry about than our little neighborhood."

She caught a look at Mike's face just a moment before he spoke up. His expression was tight and strained. "Yeah but what if they *do* come back?" he asked. "What are we going to do?"

Ted and Karen exchanged a look. Jane figured they had been too busy convincing themselves that she was perfectly safe from soldiers inside the house that they hadn't stopped to consider the possibility that she wasn't. "We'll figure it out, okay?" Ted answered. "Everything's fine right now so we don't have to worry for a little while."

Jane glanced at Mike who looked completely unconvinced by his father's words. She squeezed his hand gently, not tight enough for anyone to notice. He let out a small sigh and looked down at their hands. It seemed he too wasn't too embarrassed to hold onto her in front of his parents. "Hey, Holly." She said looking down at the little girl. "Do you want to keep me company while I go have some cereal?"

"Okay." Holly said cheerfully before hopping off of her lap. Before heading out of the room she looked over at Mike. "Are you going to eat breakfast too?"

Mike's clearly worried expression was replaced with a smile as he pushed himself off of the couch. "Yeah, sure, I'm starving."

Holly walked a few feet in front of them, almost just out of ear shot. She once again squeezed his hand to get his attention. His contagious smile had once again fallen since they left the living room. "You worried about me?" she asked quietly so Holly wouldn't hear.

Mike's lips twitched in the way Jane's always did before she started smiling again. "Yeah." He admitted. "I am worried about you. I'm always worried about you." He looked down at her. "Are you worrying about me worrying about you?"

"Yes." Jane bumped her shoulder against his. Well, more like his arm since she was too short to reach his shoulder. "Everything's going to be fine, right? Isn't that what you've been telling me for months?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, I know." Mike said. "But I just really thought I was going to lose you for a second. And it scared me. A lot."

She brushed her fingers against him again. "I'm still here, Mike." She said, "You're not getting rid of me yet. You're stuck with me for a little while longer."

Mike smiled wide enough that it reached his eyes. Jane was pretty sure he could light up an entire room. "I really wish I could kiss you right now." He muttered through gritted teeth.

Jane immediately felt her face catch on fire. She glanced forward at Holly who was already in the kitchen and pulling out a chair. "You'll have to wait. Think you can handle it?"

"I waited four months." Mike pointed out. "I think I'll be fine."

When they made it into the kitchen Jane grabbed three bowls from the cabinet while Mike got the milk and cereal. Jane asked Holly about school and they both listened to her babble as they ate. Jane was amazed not only that Holly would one day be all grown up but that she had once been so small. It was even more astonishing that Mike had also once been so small. She sat close enough to him that she could reach for his hand underneath the table but not too close

that it was noticeable.

It was practically a miracle that most of the nervousness she typically felt around him had disappeared overnight. She knew that if her friends could see her holding hands with a cute boy that they would be incredibly proud of her. They would probably faint if she told them she had spent the night in his room *and* kissed him.

About an hour later Jane went up to get her photo album back from Nancy's room. Since she'd forced herself to look through it the book wasn't nearly as intimidating as it had once been. As she walked out of Nancy's room she glanced down at her much younger smiling face staring back up at her. It was amazing how quickly the events of the war could ruin everything. Kids were hardly as innocent as she had once been. The fact that Holly had to worry about bombings and soldiers made her feel bitter again.

She looked back up from the book and spotted Mike's open bedroom door down the hall. A smile, not quite as big as the one she wore in the picture, spread on her face as she headed towards his room. Jane stood in the doorway and spotted him sitting with his back to her on his bed. His hair was a tad messy and his elbows were rested on his knees. She knocked her knuckle against the door gently. "Mike?"

His posture straightened and he glanced over his shoulder to look at her. She barely got a chance to analyze his expression before it changed into a smile. Jane only took a few steps into his room before he got to his feet and met her halfway. "What's that?" he asked when he spotted the album tucked under her arm.

"Some photos." She told him. Behind his ever illuminating smile she could still see a hint of worry in his eyes. "What's wrong? Are you still worried about me?"

Mike sighed. "Jane, I'm worried about you every second of every day. Most of the time I'm just able to hide it better." His eyes drifted back down to the album. "Can I look?"

She nodded, "Yeah, sure." Jane handed it to him and followed as he walked over to his bed, but her mind was stuck on what he had said. Was he really always so worried about her? It was a surprise he

wasn't totally exhausted. She was already tired enough from worrying about Mike so much for one night.

Jane sat close next to him and watched his expression as he opened up the cover. A constant smile was on his face as he flipped through the pictures. He lingered on one from her twelfth birthday. She was sat in front of a cake with her parents on either side of her and Gwen and Rita standing behind them. Jane remembered that her and her mother had made and decorated the cake themselves. Her mother had already gotten sick and had started to deteriorate but she was still strong enough to have a good time. "You look like her." He said quietly.

She smiled a little bit. It was something she had been told for almost her entire life. "She always looked younger than she was and I always looked older." Jane said. "People used to ask if we were sisters."

Mike smiled even wider. "Who's behind you?"

"My best friends. That's Rita, that's Gwen." Jane thought about how much of a shame it was that they'd yet to get the chance to meet Mike. She longed for the teasing they would have done and that she couldn't ask them for advice on handling her feelings. "Rita was kind of popular. She had more money than we did and everyone in school liked her. She always got invited to parties. But she would never go if we couldn't."

For the first time Mike looked away from the album and up at her. "I hope I get to meet them one day."

Jane felt her throat start to burn so she tore her eyes away from him and down at the album. "There's a picture here I know you'll want to see." She said before turning to the page where the picture from the dance was. His eyes went wide and he held it up closer to his face. "This was the last dance I ever went to."

An ear to ear grin was spread on his face. "You're so young and cute." He said.

"I remember that night Gwen had this plan to get this boy from our grade to ask her to dance." Jane told him. "She made us come over

beforehand so we could help her get ready. I don't know why she asked me, though. My attempt at doing my makeup was so pathetic that Rita had to do it over for me."

"Did she get the boy to dance with her?"

Jane grinned. "Sort of. She ended up asking him to dance because he didn't get the hint." She remembered how frustrated her friend had been when she marched right over to him. "Then they both had someone to dance with, and they felt bad for me, so Rita got her guys friend to ask me to dance."

"Oh yeah?" Mike asked. "Was he cute?"

She bumped her shoulder against his. "He was the same height as me and he kept stepping on my toes." Jane wrapped her arms around his waist. "You know what I was thinking about last night? Before the bombing."

Mike looked back over at her. "What?"

"I was thinking that if me and my friends had been at the dance they would have been fighting over you." She told him. "They both have a thing for older guys. Rita told us she would never date anyone shorter than 5'11 and last Christmas Gwen had a bad break up and said 'if his GPA is lower than 3.5 he's not worth my time'."

Mike laughed. "Your friends sound hilarious." He said. "Who do you think would win the fight?"

"Me." Jane answered. "They would be too busy bickering so I would walk over to you and they probably wouldn't even notice."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "And what would you say to me?"

Jane grinned and got to her feet. She walked a short distance away with her back to him before turning around and walking over to him once again. The smile he wore was contagious and her face twitched as she tried to fight one off. It wasn't quite the same in his bedroom as it would have been in an actual school dance but she did her best to pretend. Jane held out her hand to him. "I don't know how to dance very well and I'm total rubbish at talking about my feelings."

She said. "But my friends and I were fighting over you and I hate losing arguments. So I think you should dance with me."

Mike's smile grew, if it was even possible, and he grabbed her hand and got to his feet. *"That is an offer I could not refuse."* He said as he wrapped one of his arms around her waist.

"What can I say?" she said sarcastically. "I just have a way with words."

Jane put her hand that wasn't wrapped around his on the back of his neck. She pulled him down and stood on her toes so she could reach him. Even after the number of kisses he'd given her before she fell asleep she still felt her whole body start to buzz. She would have felt less electricity if she grabbed onto a live wire with her bare hands.

Even if she didn't believe that she was safe from the soldiers, and knew there was a possibility that she could be taken at any time, she figured she might as well enjoy her time with the Wheelers. Now that she had given in she couldn't figure out why she had resisted her feelings for Mike so strongly. If she had known how good it would feel to kiss him and how alive she would feel when he touched her she likely wouldn't have pushed him away for so long.

"Hey lovebirds." Nancy's voice said interrupting her thoughts. Matching coats of blush covered their faces as they pulled away and spotted her standing in the doorway. She wore her fluffy robe and a smirk as she grabbed onto the door handle. "Close the door next time. I won't keep your little secret if you guys don't try to either." She winked at them before pulling the door shut.

Jane rested her forehead on Mike's chest. She was almost as embarrassed as she had felt when Nancy coaxed an admission of her feelings out of her. But she felt a little bit better when she felt him kiss the top of her head.

12. Very Happy Unbirthday

Once again thank you so much to everyone that has been reviewing this story, each comment means so much to me. I hope you enjoy this chapter as much as I do :)

October 15th. It was the day that Jane had been dreading ever since she found out her father had been taken away. Normally Jane was one of the first to come down for breakfast (excluding the short period of time when she had been putting serious effort into avoiding Mike). Nightmares usually woke her up bright and early. But when her eyes opened that morning she immediately pulled the covers over her head and tried to fall back to sleep. It was a Sunday which meant the whole family would be home to wonder when she was getting up.

If she had her way she wouldn't get out of bed the whole day. Once she was up and awake it made the day real.

Her dad had been promising her for months that he would take her to the jewelry store in town and buy her the locket she had seen once in a magazine. It was gold and had small leaves engraved in the front. Jane already knew what picture she was going to put inside. A shot from her parents wedding when they were cutting the cake. They both looked so happy and it was the perfect size to fit inside a locket.

But it seemed that plan had fallen through. Not only was her dad not there with her but the shop, owned by a Jewish family, had probably been trashed and shut down by then. So she hid underneath the covers and didn't intend on coming out.

She didn't hear any movement on the third floor until after noon. Jane heard footsteps coming inside the nursery and a soft knock on her door. It didn't seem to matter that she didn't have the energy to reply because moments later she heard the door open and shut. The edge of her bed sunk down next to her shins. Curiosity got the better of her and she pulled down the blankets just enough to see who came in. A smile spread on Mike's face when she peeked out at him.

"So you are awake?" he asked

She groaned. "Sadly." Jane was tempted to pull the blankets up again but settled for keeping them just underneath her eyes. "What are you doing?"

Mike shrugged. "Well you always come down so early. We were starting to wonder if you were sick." He raised an eyebrow at her. "Are you sick?"

"No."

"Okay." He put his hand down on the bed on the other side of her legs to prop himself up. She could feel worry radiating off of him. "So what's wrong?"

Mike was probably the last person she wanted to tell about what was wrong. If she knew him as well as she thought she did he would end up doing something really sweet and thoughtful and completely Mike-like. She didn't know if she could handle that. Jane already felt like enough of an emotional wreck and she was worried she would totally break down if he did something thoughtful for her. But at the same time she hated the idea of lying to him. Especially when he looked so worried and cute.

She pushed the covers down to her waist and sat up. She immediately wondered if her hair looked like a total rats nest. Even when they were sitting he was still taller than her, but thankfully not by much. "Promise me you won't make it a big deal if I tell you?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Okay." He said suspiciously.

Jane let out a sigh and rubbed her eyes. Even though he agreed she had a feeling he would still end up making it into a big deal. God she really didn't want to tell him. "Today's my birthday." She finally mumbled.

"*What?*" She watched his eyes go wide and his mouth drop open, which almost made her smile. "Jane why didn't you tell me?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm telling you now."

Mike rolled his eyes. "I mean like a week ago." He said. "I would have gotten you something."

"Yeah, I know." She told him. "That's why I didn't bring it up."

His eyebrows came together. "Are you one of those people that hates their birthday?"

"I am now." Jane said. She could already feel her throat starting to burn and she hadn't even said much. "I just... never thought I would have to spend a birthday without both my parents."

Almost immediately Mike moved closer to her on the bed and reached for her hand. She didn't think she could work at his sympathetic and worried expression without crying so instead she looked down at their hands. He even had freckles on her hands. "Okay, I promise I won't make a big deal about it." He said as he rubbed circles on the back of her hand. "But please just let me get you something small. And there's a bakery in town that has really good cupcakes. Just those two things, okay?"

She groaned and rested the back of her head against the wall behind her. "I don't want you spending money on me."

"Yeah, well, I'm going to anyway." Mike said. It was funny how he always talked about her being stubborn when he was just as bad as she was. "I'm not going to let you be sad on your... seventeenth birthday?"

Jane let herself smile. "No, I'm twenty five." She replied sarcastically.

Mike rolled his eyes at her once more. "I would tell you to shut up if you weren't upset looking." He told her. "We're going to have lunch soon so you should come down, okay?"

"Yeah, okay." Jane pulled the blankets off of her and, while still holding onto Mike's hand, touched her feet to the ground. The wooden floor of her room was colder than usual. Though it may have just been her mind imagining it. Despite the fact that she was going to change her clothes she was tempted to ask Mike to stay with her. She was even more nervous about being alone with her thoughts than normal. Jane glanced up at him when he stood back up. "Can you, um, just wait for me outside?"

"Okay."

The Wheelers were like a miracle. Anytime she asked for something that might make things easier for her (like looking through the photo album with Nancy or spending the night in Mike's room that *one time*) they agreed without a seconds hesitation. Mike's hand slipped from hers as he headed over to the door. He looked back at her just before ducking back out into the closet. "Do you want me to leave it open a little?"

"Yeah."

Once he was outside he left the door open by just about three inches. She pulled out a pair of jeans and t-shirt before throwing them on. Had it been a normal birthday she might have gotten a little more dressed up. But she wanted the day to be as normal as possible. Jane was thankful her hair had once again grown out just enough for her to tie it up because she really did not feel like brushing it out. It was just one of those days.

When she emerged from her room she immediately spotted Mike sitting in the old rocking chair in the nursery. He perked up the way he always seemed to do when she came into a room. It was the little things he probably wasn't even conscious of that made her feel just a little bit of how he saw her. Mike never had to tell her how much he cared about her. Things he did every day made her fully aware. Like how he seemed incapable of being in a room with her and not be sitting next to her, or how she was constantly catching him staring at her, or how he was constantly brushing her hand against hers when he thought no one was looking.

His hand once again found hers once she reached him. She put her hand on his shoulder and gently tugged on his collar the way she always did when she wanted to kiss him. He was still just a bit too tall for her to reach even when she stood on her toes. A smile spread on his face before he leaned down to her height and pressed his lips against hers. After almost a month of stealing kisses in the hallway when no one was around Jane still felt just as electric when their lips met. Mike was a sensational human being. Everything about him seemed too good to be true.

Jane felt her heart start to pound when he pulled away and looked at her like she was truly amazing. It was hard not to feel a little bit amazing.

They only let go of one another when they reached the first floor. Her hand felt cold almost the second his left. Mike practically ran over to his parents who sat on the couch and whispered in their ears. Jane didn't need three guesses to figure out what he was telling them. She did her best to ignore the way they looked over at her with slightly wide eyes. Down the hall she spotted Nancy in the kitchen and she quickly made her escape to help her with whatever she was doing.

She leaned on the counter next to Nancy and watched her peel a small pile of carrots. "What are you making?" she asked curiously.

"A salad." Nancy answered. "Our neighbor gave us a bunch of vegetables from her garden. They look pretty good so I figured we'd eat them before they go bad."

"Can I help with anything?"

A small smile spread on Nancy's face. "Still remember how to make that dressing I showed you?"

About 90% of what she knew about cooking had come from either Karen or Nancy. For years her and her father had been limited to the simplest of dishes since she knew even less about cooking than he did. Her mother had been the cook of the family. If only the two of them could see her now; making a salad dressing strictly from memory. Mike came into the kitchen only a few minutes later and took a seat at the kitchen table behind them just as he did for every meal that he was home for. He was their entertainment while they worked.

"Are you going to the football game tonight?" Nancy asked over her shoulder.

Behind her Jane could hear Mike snorting. She figured she already knew the answer since he hadn't once mentioned a football game coming up. "No." he answered shortly. "Did you seriously think I would?"

Nancy shrugged. "I don't know. I figured you and your friends would be hang out since Lucas is out of the hospital."

She heard the chair scrape against the floor as Mike stood up. "We're going to the movies on Tuesday." He said as he walked over. Once he was leaning on the counter on the other side of Nancy he quickly swiped one of the carrots she had finished peeling. "Besides," he said while he ignored the glare she shot at him, "I have much more important plans tonight."

"Oh yeah?" Nancy asked suspiciously, "What plans, then?"

Jane glanced up from the garlic clove she was working on for the dressing. He took her lack of a sour expression as an 'okay'. "Today's Jane's birthday."

Nancy practically dropped both the peeler and carrot she was holding before she turned sharply to face her. "Today's your *birthday*?" she asked. "Why didn't you say anything?"

With her eyes fixed on the garlic on the cutting board in front of her Jane shrugged. It had been ten minutes and she already hated all the attention. She couldn't help but feel a bit of regret for telling him. "It's not a big deal."

"Your seventeenth birthday is absolutely a big deal." She argued.

Jane looked up and over at Mike with a small smile. "Your sister knows how old I am."

She figured her attempt at changing the subject was successful when Nancy shook her head and looked over at him. "Did you *seriously* not know how old your girlfriend was?"

Despite the fact that they had never specifically discussed the whole boyfriend-girlfriend thing neither of them corrected Nancy whenever she teased them about it. Jane had broken down a couple days after the bombing and told her most of what happened between them. She left out the part where she ended up sleeping in his room that night.

"Well I was pretty sure." He said defensively. "But she never told me so I wasn't 100% positive." Mike bit off the end of the carrot. "At least

I knew she wasn't, like, fourteen."

"Mike, ew, I don't even want to imagine you guys if she was fourteen." Nancy put her hands on his arm and shoved him back over to the table behind them. "Get out of here, nasty."

Jane remembered back in school with her friends when they thought Senior Boys were some sort of mythical creature that was so unattainable. She was dying to tell them all about the cute senior boy she was with. Sometimes the fact that he was in his senior year freaked her out since the last time she'd been in school she had still been a sophomore. It was easy to forget that she would have been a junior if everything was normal.

As they ate lunch Jane could feel everyone casting her occasional glances. Although Mike had promised not to make a big deal about her birthday she wondered if they had different definitions of a 'big deal'. The fact that he was already going to be spending money on her was a bit too much for her liking. Jane just didn't have the heart to try and convince him not to.

Mere minutes after they all finished eating Jane spotted Ted and Mike heading out the front door from where she stood in the kitchen. She pretended not to know where they were going as she washed the dishes that she had brought in from the dining room.

The rest of the day was mostly normal. She played with Holly and read in the living room. Mike was a bit more cheerful than he already was every other day. Not much else was different. That is until she went to help with dinner and Nancy and Karen quickly shooed her back out and insisted that she take the night off of being so helpful. She didn't offer up much protest and headed up the stairs to Mike's room.

Jane didn't have to wait too long after knocking for his door to open. He closed it behind her once she was inside and reached for her hand. "Okay," Mike said as he sat down next to her on his bed. "You know how I said that I was going to do those two things and that was it?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Yes." She already didn't like the

direction the conversation was going in.

"Well two things turned into three." He said. "We picked up something that's from all of us but I got something that's just from me."

"Mike." Jane whined after she gave his shoulder a light shove. "I told you I didn't want you spending money on me."

He pushed himself up and headed over to his dresser. "I know, I know. I couldn't help myself." He said. "I didn't wrap it if that makes you feel better."

She spotted a small box sitting on top of his dresser just before he picked it up. It looked suspiciously like a jewelry box. Mike came back over and sat facing her on the bed. Her hands felt heavy when he placed the box in his hand. She didn't need to open it to know that she could never afford something as nice to give to him. The thought made her heart clench.

Mike must have read something in her face because he put his hand on her knee. "Jane, don't do that guilty self-deprecating thing you always do, okay?" he said. "I *wanted* to get you something. I tried to pick out something little because I know you said you didn't want me to make a big deal about it but you're kind of a big deal to me."

Jane looked up from the box at him. She could feel the smile he wore transfer onto her own face despite the guilt that still nagged at her. But it didn't take much to see that he was practically itching for her to open it he was so excited. So she looked back down at the box and pulled the top off. Her mouth fell open when her eyes landed on a silver chained bracelet with small opal beads. It was, by far, the nicest piece of jewelry she had ever owned in her life. Jane had never been much of a jewelry person in general but she already knew she would probably never take the bracelet off.

Once she had it on her wrist she set the box aside and tightly wrapped her arms around his neck. Jane was constantly going back and forth between being terrified of how quickly she was falling for Mike and offering up no protests and letting herself fall. It was so easy to forget that some people in the world wanted her dead when

Mike simply adored her. She felt as close as she could to normal when she was with him.

She pulled away and rested her hands on his cheeks. Her thumbs gently rubbed across the freckles scattered across his face. Anyone who hated freckles hadn't met Mike. Every last detail about him was perfect. Jane could have easily spent a whole day staring at him. If only they had the time.

"I love it." She said with a wide smile on her face. Her throat felt tight with happy tears but she choked them down. "I don't know what I did to deserve you."

"I was thinking the same thing." He told her.

Jane closed the distance between them and pressed her lips against his. She hadn't been so happy in a long time. The longer Mike continued to spend as much time with her as he could the less worried Jane became that he was eventually going to get sick of her. If he felt just a little bit of what she felt for him she had a hell of a long time before she had to worry about him getting tired of her.

His lips moved against hers in a way that made her feel as if she could float away. Kissing Mike and looking at Mike had quickly become her two favorite hobbies. In that order. She felt antsy when she eagerly awaited him to come home every day. When he did she had to hold herself back from grabbing onto his hand and dragging him straight up the stairs.

She had never imagined she could be so happy during the war. While she felt guilty that others were suffering while she was cuddled up with a cute boy she didn't think she could stop. As much as part of her brain told her that the best thing to do would have been to push him away she knew she couldn't. It would hurt him too much and she knew she didn't have it in her to do that to him or herself.

13. What are you thinking?

wow I'm so silly, I uploaded this to my document manager but never posted it. whoops.

I'd like to apologize in advanced since I didn't edit this chapter. I've been having a bit of health problems lately and today I just do not have the brain power haha. Regardless I hope you like this update :)

Holly had caught a cold from someone at school. She had been alternating between sneezing and coughing for hours straight on Saturday morning. When Karen finally took her temperature they decided to take her to the doctor. They had just been putting on their coats when Nancy, who had been sitting next to Jane on the couch, announced that she would go with them. When she stood up she leaned down and whispered in her ear "behave yourselves" before joining her parents by the front door. Once the front door shut behind them the only sound in the house was the sink running in the kitchen as Mike cleaned off his plate from lunch.

They were home alone. Nancy was doing her a favor she didn't entirely understand. She'd never had a boyfriend before (was Mike her boyfriend? They'd yet to explicitly discuss it) and was totally clueless what to do with one in a big empty house. Jane marked the page in her book before closing it and setting it next to her on the couch. There was still a mark on the front door from when Mike's soot covered hands had shut it the night of the bombing. It was a reminder she didn't want or need.

Jane's footsteps sounded ten times louder than usual as she walked into the kitchen. His sleeves were pulled up past his elbows and his bangs were damp and pushed off his forehead. She leaned on the counter next to him just as he shut the water off. "They take Holly to the doctor?"

"Yeah." She told him. Jane couldn't help but notice that he looked incredibly cute with his hair pushed back like that. "Nancy went with them."

She watched his face carefully as he seemed to realize what she meant. His eyebrows climbed high on his forehead and he turned to face her. "No one's home?"

"No."

He leaned on the counter with only an inch away from her. "So... what do you want to do?"

"I don't know." She admitted.

They stood side by side looking out the kitchen window at the view of the backyard. She could see the shed on the other side of the yard. There had yet to be any air raids since the night she ran back into the house to get Holly. Jane remembered how totally irritated she had been with him when she first started staying with the Wheelers. Back when she thought he lacked any depth just because he lived in a house she had only been able to dream of. She felt a bit foolish for being so miserably wrong about him.

She looked up at him. "What are you thinking about?"

His eyes lingered on the view out the window before he looked down at her. "The day that you came you kind of freaked out on me a little bit. I told you that you were a VIP and you got all upset with me." Jane tried not to cringe at the memory of the awful first impression she must have made. "I thought you would loosen up a little bit later on but I could tell that you were dealing with a lot. So I tried to make you smile, like, every day." Mike laughed quietly and shook his head. "Then when you finally did smile I wasn't even trying that hard."

Jane grinned. She had likely only smiled because of how much of an emotional wreck she had been in the moment. "I should have come with some sort of warning sign that I'm a little sensitive." She joked

Mike turned to face her. "Do you have any idea how confusing it was when the first time I ever saw you smile was when you were crying?" He asked. She couldn't help but laugh. It wouldn't have come as a surprise if he told her everything she did the first month she was there confused him. "You look so sad when you're crying, but then you started smiling. And I never wanted to see you not smiling."

She put her arm around his waist and leaned against him. "Like you?" she asked. "You're going to get so many wrinkles when you get older because you're never not smiling."

"Yeah?" he said. "I bet you'll look young forever from all that time you wouldn't smile."

"All the cosmetic companies trying to find the secret to youth should give me a call."

She rested her chin on his chest and looked up at him. He was unfairly good looking. She wondered if everything he said about him and his friends being too nerdy for girls at school to look their way was just lies to make her feel better. Jane wished that all the girls from her school who used to tease her for dressing like a boy could see her with Mike. He never seemed to mind that she wore pants and baggy t-shirts, or that she liked her hair short, or that she didn't act like a lady. It was one of her favorite things about him. He never once tried to change her.

"What are you thinking?" Mike asked her.

"I'm thinking that I'm pretty lucky that I got stuck with you guys." She told him. "And not with someone who wouldn't really care about me."

Mike put his arms around her waist. "You know, when my parents told me that we were going to be hiding a girl in the nursery I had no idea what to expect." She could feel him start to trail his fingers up and down her back and hoped he couldn't feel the shiver that shot down her spine. "I didn't expect to be totally head over heels in, like, three days."

She raised her eyebrows. "*Three days?* That was it?"

"Yeah, that was it." He said. "I can't resist a girl that isolates herself and hides behind books."

Jane laughed, "It's a miracle you noticed me at all."

"I noticed you the day you got here."

She stood on her toes and kissed him. The feeling of him smiling

against her lips was completely addicting. With no one home they didn't have to worry about escaping upstairs or into an empty room and trying not to be too suspicious. Even though she figured it was only a matter of time before the Wheelers figured them out they still tried to keep the secret as best she could. But with the house empty she didn't have to worry about anyone seeing them. Kissing him felt even better when she didn't have to worry about being caught.

Jane could feel every hair on her body standing on end when Mike's fingers started trailing up and down her back. It was wild to her that his touch could have such an effect on her while she could feel nothing when someone else reached for her. There must have been something about Mike that made him so special and set him apart from everyone else. Something in his DNA or his chemical makeup. There had to be *something* that could cause her to all of a sudden become so boy crazy.

Mike's lips left hers and moved along her jawline. She kept her arms wrapped around his neck and rested the back of her head on the cabinets that she was just tall enough to reach. Her body temperature was climbing like a hot oven. Though she had no clue if he noticed his own skin under her hands felt warm.

She had no clue how long the family would be out for. She also had no clue how long they stood in the kitchen like that. Jane could feel her thoughts getting fuzzy and faded and she forced herself to pull away from him. His cheeks were flushed bright pink and his eyes looked as cloudy as her mind felt. It was difficult to keep herself from letting her eyes drift down to his lips.

"How long do you think they'll be gone?" she asked quietly. Her voice wouldn't let her speak much louder than a whisper.

Mike glanced down the hall and towards the front door. "I don't know. Probably an hour, at least. Her doctor is pretty far away." He looked back down at her. "Why? You worried?"

She nodded. "I mean, it would kind of suck if they saw us." Jane said. "They might make some ground rules if they found out."

"Yeah, that would suck." Mike agreed. "We can go to my room. I can

leave the windows open so we'll hear the car come back."

Jane had been inside Mike's room dozens of times, mostly in the weeks following the bombing. If he wasn't sneaking up to her room she was sneaking into his. But with someone else in the family always home they knew there was only so much they could do and so much time they could spend together before one of them had to go back downstairs.

Now the house was empty. Technically, they didn't have to do anything. Nervous butterflies sprouted up and fluttered about in her stomach. Something about the idea of being in Mike's room with no one home felt very different. She had probably been reading too far into things, since that was something she was so good at. Jane wondered what her friends would have done if they were in her situation. Gwen likely would have raced him up the stairs.

Only you would have a total freak out at the idea of being alone with your boyfriend they would have said to her. They would have been right. What the hell was she so scared of?

"Yeah, okay." She said, "That sounds good."

She kept her arm linked with his as they walked from the kitchen to the stairs. Inside her chest her heart started beating faster but she ignored it as best she could. What was there to be so nervous about? It was just Mike. They'd been alone dozens of times before. Did it really matter so much that there was no one else in the house? Probably not. But one of her greatest talents was worrying and she didn't know how to make herself stop.

Once they were up in his room he only closed the door over. The last time they'd been in his room with the door open was when Nancy caught them kissing the day after the bombing. With it still somewhat open she felt exposed. But, as usual, she felt better with Mike. She followed him as he walked over to the window next to his bed and opened it. She sucked the little bit of fresh air into her lungs and let out a sigh.

Jane could feel him looking at her but her eyes were fixed on the street outside. There were two children drawing on the pavement

with chalk. "What would you do if the war ended right now and you could go outside?"

She fell silent as she thought about her answer. It wasn't a scenario she imagined often since it usually made her feel bitter and depressed. But she figured it was something she had to consider at some point. As long as she was still inside the house there was a chance she could get out on the other side alive. "I would just go out and breathe the fresh air. And I wouldn't wear a jacket. And I wouldn't even worry about getting hit by a car."

"Why not?"

"As long as I die after the war is over I'll die happy." She tore her eyes away from the window to look at his face. "There isn't much more I can really ask for." Jane watched his face carefully as he thought over what she said. Though she wasn't good at reading people she knew enough to see that he wasn't particularly pleased with the idea of her getting hit by a car. "What would you do?"

Mike glanced down at the window and bit down on his bottom lip. She couldn't help but notice how cute he looked. "I would call my friends." He said. "And tell them about the girl that's been living with us and how totally crazy I am about her."

Jane couldn't help but grin. "Has it been hard to keep it from them?" She asked. "It's kind of a big secret. I've never been able to keep something like that from my friends."

He was silent for a moment. Hardly long enough for her to notice. "It's pretty hard, yeah." He told her. "But whenever I wanna say something I just think about how I would feel if you got taken away because of me."

Inside her chest Jane could feel her heart squeeze. She had a feeling that Mike was good at worrying about things and beating himself up more than he needed to. Though he never said much about it he had said more than once how her safety was almost constantly on his mind. She felt guilty that she had become such a burden to him, but she knew if she were to mention it that he would call it anything but a burden.

So instead of mentioning it she wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest. "I bet once you can talk about me your friends would be annoyed to death with you."

"Definitely." He agreed. Considering how thin he was he always held her so tightly. "It will happen one day, you know. No war can last forever."

"The Dutch-Scilly War was 335 years." Jane said. Was it her stubbornness or her pessimism that made her always feel the need to contradict everything he said? Either way she wished she could make herself stop.

If she were Mike she would have been completely fed up with her by then. But instead he just shook his head. "I doubt it will last that long. It will be over soon."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

She rested her chin on his chest and looked up at him. In a million ways she wished she could be like him. Not just in the obvious ways that would make her life easier (such as being a white, non Jewish male) but in his spirits as well. The only time he ever seemed truly shaken by something was the day the solider came to the house. Even the day of the bombing he was grinning at her with a smile that cracked his face in half and told her that her runny make up looked good. Mike was able to find the good in everything. Even in the bitter girl living in his house.

"I feel very lucky to have you." She said. It wasn't uncommon that she would feel the need to tell him how much she cared for him. She didn't do it nearly enough and she knew if something happened and she never saw him again that she would feel guilty if he didn't know how much he meant to her.

Mike pressed a kiss on her forehead. "I'm the lucky one."

She put her hands on the back of his neck and pulled him down just enough for her to reach him. Their lips met and they seemed to pick

up right where they left off in the kitchen. His hands on her waist kept her anchored in her spot, which she was thankful for since she often felt her knees go weak when he kissed her. Everything around them seemed to melt away. The feeling of the breeze and the sound of children's voices outside faded until they disappeared and the only sensation she experienced was Mike kissing her.

Alone in his bedroom with his lips on hers she never thought about the war or the soldiers hunting people like her down or the people she had once known that seemed to disappear off the face of the earth. There was only her and Mike and his bedroom. If she could have she would have kissed him all day and night.

Was it her that started walking towards his bed first or him? She didn't know. She didn't particularly notice either until the back of her knees hit the mattress and she stumbled backwards. His hands grabbed onto hers as she fell onto her back and, accident or not, she didn't at all mind that she brought him down with her.

Mike made no attempt to move off of her, and she didn't try to make him. She could see his eyes darting across the features of her face but didn't find herself feeling self conscious in the lightest bit. Had she been under such close inspection a few months back she would have made an excuse to leave the room. Instead she was totally comfortable. She often marveled at how everything about her relationship with Mike had changed in just a few months.

He leaned down and kissed her again. As she always was whenever she wasn't standing she was thankful that she didn't have to worry about collapsing when he touched her. His body was so close to hers and he kissed her in a way that she wasn't quite used to, both of which left her head spinning. She felt as if she had stepped onto a new carnival ride she had never tried before and she was throwing her hands in the air. Only metaphorically. In reality her hands were on the back of his neck.

When his lips left hers she only had time to be disappointed for a split second before he started trailing kisses down her jaw. It was the last bit on convincing she needed to be sure that Mike's kisses held some sort of magic within them. Maybe he was a magician in his spare time. He was enough of a nerd that it wasn't totally out of the

question.

His kisses moved further and further down until she was glad she had opted out of the top button of her shirt that day. The rational part of her brain was getting softer and softer but she could still hear it telling her that he was going to leave a mark on her skin and that she should stop. Every other part of her brain reminded her that they hardly ever got time truly alone together. She listened to this part as she gripped onto his neck and let sounds that had never come from her body before escape her lips.

Laying on Mike's bed while he kissed her neck restored her faith in heaven. If she had been a good enough person she was sure that her after life would consist entirely of being kissed by Mike Wheeler. There could be nothing else better in existence. Anyone who thought otherwise had not had the opportunity to kiss him. She couldn't help but wonder if he had many girlfriends before meeting her since he was so good at kissing. It was a bit suspicious but in the moment she didn't care.

Rita's older sister had given Jane *the talk*. She was pretty sure her dad asked her to since he felt to awkward to do it himself. It was probably better that he hadn't. Jane had been sitting in Rita's bedroom with both her and her sister. Angela was three years older than them and even more intimidatingly beautiful. Yet, just like Rita, her personality was even more attractive. She had told them about a boy she'd been seeing and that they planned on getting 'a bit more serious' in her words. Jane had heard of sex before but was still only an outsider who didn't understand looking in.

Rita seemed to know just as little so Angela explained it to them. How it's something they should have waited a little while for and could never, under any circumstances, do without reinforcement. She said it hurt and that sometimes there was bleeding, but when she saw the horror in Jane's face she quickly added that it didn't last long.

"Well what's the point if it hurts?" she had asked. "What's so good about it?"

Angela only smiled and said. "When you find the right person you'll see the appeal."

Jane had found the right person. And she understood the appeal. Would it hurt more than the time Elizabeth Peterson had accidentally knocked her down half a flight of stairs in the ninth grade? She doubted it. She wasn't sure how much she would bleed but Mike's bedsheets were a deep navy so she figured it wouldn't be too bad either way. The only thing she was unsure of was how to go about telling him what she wanted.

She did, after all, have a way with words.

Jane searched and searched for something to say. But everything she came up with sounded silly even in her mind. Besides, even if she found something she wasn't sure her voice would work if she tried. Instead she moved her hands down to his chest and pushed him off of her so she could sit up. Without looking at him directly she grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it up over her head. The draft coming in through the window made her feel cool but her face was still burning warm. She was too nervous to look at him so she quickly kissed him again and put her hands on his neck and leaned back down.

Time was a concept she could no longer wrap her head around. They could have been there for hours, but they could have been there for 30 minutes. She couldn't tell either way. Bit by bit layers of clothes were discarded and thrown to the floor. It wasn't until there was only one layer for them to take off that Mike pulled away and looked at her. His eyes looked just as cloudy as her mind felt.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked. The worry in his voice was as clear as the sky outside.

Her eyes drifted down to a mark she had left on his collarbone. She hoped that he had a shirt with a high enough collar to cover it. "Yes."

"Like 100% sure."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Like 200% sure."

"Okay, okay, sorry." He said as he reached over towards his nightstand. "I'm just checking."

Although his need to check on her was borderline agitating she was thankful that he cared about her enough to worry so much in the first place.

xXx

The sound of a car door outside sent them wide eyed and alert. Jane clutched the blankets as Mike stumbled out of bed and peered out the window. She was thankful they were on the second floor so that they had a bit of time to gather themselves before the family came up. He didn't even need to say it was them, Jane could hear Holly's voice through the open window. She jumped out of bed and darted to the door to close it all the way.

When she turned back to face Mike he tossed her clothes to her across the room and she pulled them on as fast as she could. She was working on the buttons of her shirt when she heard the front door open downstairs. His hair was a bit of a mess, but it usually was anyway. She stood in front of the mirror and she tied her own hair up into a knot the moment she saw how much of a mess it was. Her eyes then spotted the marks scattered across her neck. She pulled down her collar to find even more underneath her shirt. Jane shot him a glare in the reflection of the mirror.

"Sorry." He said. But the smile on his face was a dead giveaway that he wasn't sorry at all.

She did her buttons up all the way to the top and groaned. "I feel like I'm choking." She muttered.

Mike came over and tucked a piece of hair that was too short to fit into the ponytail behind her ear. "Maybe you can borrow some makeup from Nancy to cover it up."

"Absolutely not." She said. "I don't want her to see." Jane glanced at herself again in the mirror. "I'm going to go see if I have a sweater I can wear or something. I'll be back."

She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek before heading for the door. Just as she started heading for the stairs Nancy came up to the second floor. She only had time to wonder if all the marks were

covered before she saw her eyebrows shoot up high on her forehead.

"You guys have fun?" Nancy asked. Jane could hear the suggestion in her tone.

"Yeah."

"I can see that."

Her hand instantly shot up to her neck while her cheeks turned bright red. The fact that she was Mike's sister made it ten times as embarrassing for her to have an idea of what they had just done. Nancy met her in the middle of the hallway and nodded towards her bedroom behind her. "Want to borrow something to cover them up?"

Jane was too mortified to speak so she simply nodded and followed Nancy to her room. It wasn't until she was sitting in the chair at her vanity while Nancy dug through her things that she found her voice again. "Please don't tell your parents."

She heard Nancy snort. "I wouldn't dream of it." She said as she pulled out the bottle of liquid skin color. "You can't leave the house, so if figure you should be able to have as much fun inside as you can. As long as you guys are responsible."

Jane's cheeks felt even warmer but she couldn't hold back a smile. Growing up she had always wanted an older sister. She felt like she was as close to having one as she could get.

14. Bergen-Belsen

wow I can't believe we've made it to the second to last chapter. well technically this is the last chapter and the next update will be an epilogue but whatever. this is by far the chapter I had the most fun writing and I cannot wait for you guys to read it. thank you to everyone that has reviewed this story so far, especially those of you who have continued to review over and over again. :))

Just as she had been for the past month and a half Jane sat down on the couch at 2:30 with a book in her lap. On days when Mike came straight home from school he arrived anywhere from 2:45 to 3:10. Since she had no other option but to be cooped up inside all day she had become somewhat of an expert on the schedule of the Wheeler family. She knew everything from when Ted came downstairs to take his blood pressure medication to when Holly started to get cranky and need to take a nap. Most days that she waited for Mike to get home Nancy shot her a cheeky grin before sitting down next to her with a book of her own. She'd yet to spill the secret of their relationship, which Jane was thankful for every day.

The days had started to blend together into two different categories. Pre Elden Avenue Bombing and Post Elden Avenue Bombing. Dates and days of the week hardly mattered to her anymore. Unless it was the weekend and Mike wasn't going to a friend's house, that was the only scenario where she cared what day of the week it was. Jane's life had become unremarkable and plain. Yet at the same time it was everything she could ask for. She was safe and was living with a family that had welcomed her with open arms. Everything she'd had to give up was, most of the time, worth it.

Most days were uneventful.

Others were not.

At 3 PM on the dot the front door flew open and slammed against the wall. Both Jane and Nancy jumped and stared at Mike with wide eyes as he rushed inside and practically collapsed in an arm chair next to the radio. He was out of breath and his hair stood up in the way it

always did when he tried in vain to push it off his forehead. It usually made him look completely adorable but Jane was more focused on how strange he was acting out of nowhere.

"What the hell, Mike?" Nancy snapped as she got up and closed the front door. In the moments it had been open Jane felt panicked by the possibility that someone could see her. If the wrong person ever caught sight of her through an open door or window she could get into serious trouble. It only took one tip to the Nazi's for a house to be searched. Mike's crazed demeanor didn't help calm her down.

"Shut up and listen." He replied shortly as he turned the volume of the radio up all the way. It crackled and distorted at such a high volume.

All three of them felt silent as the voice of the reporter filled the living room. He spoke rushed and excitedly and was a bit hard to understand. But she managed to make it out. "On this day, four months after the suicide of Adolf Hitler, the second world war is officially over. Surviving soldiers will be returning to their home countries and we've heard word that the Jewish prisoners taken by the Nazi's will all be identified and returned to their families."

Jane's whole body felt numb. As if someone had reached into her head and flipped off a switch in her brain. She couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. She wished someone would hit her or something so she would know she wasn't in a dream. Could it be true? Was it all really over? For months she had been wondering what would happen once it was all over. Was she just imagining it a bit too vividly? Her imagination had strengthened somewhat since she moved in. sometimes dangerously so. Jane looked over at Mike who was grinning at her from ear to ear.

"It's over." He said simply.

She pushed herself onto her feet and hurried around the coffee table to reach him. Yet another miracle was that her legs weren't shaking quite hard enough to cause her to collapse. He stood up just in time for her to reach him and throw her arms around his neck. By the way he stumbled slightly she figured she had crashed into him harder than she meant to. For the first time in over a year she was crying

about something that didn't make her feel totally hopeless.

Mike's arms tightly wrapped around her waist and she could feel his cheek rest on the top of her head. For once she wasn't worried about someone catching them being affectionate with one another. Though she was pretty sure his parents had figured it out by then neither she or Mike had said or done much to confirm it. And Nancy was a fantastic secret keeper. Even though she knew they typically help themselves back around her. But Jane didn't mind at all that Nancy was standing only a few feet away from her.

She wasn't sure when Karen and Ted came downstairs but when she finally pulled away from Mike they were standing nearby and staring wide eyed at the radio. Though the reporter repeated the same things over and over again in different ways Jane could have listened to it for the rest of her life.

It was over.

Jewish prisoners taken by the Nazi's will all be identified and returned to their families.

As they listened the voice started talking about centers being set up for families to ask about people that had been taken and get some answers as to where they were being taken. He then started spouting off addresses of the centers that had already been set up. Suddenly Karen's head perked up and a smile spread on her face. "Beverly Road." She repeated from the list that was still being read. "That's only half an hour away from here. We can go if you want."

All eyes landed on Jane. She could get her father back. She could get her friends back. But everything about the process was terrifying. Jane hadn't left the Wheeler property since she stepped foot onto it. They were the only people she had talked to in months. She felt safe inside the house and in her little hidden bedroom. The world outside the windows and walls had become her enemy. Was she ready to walk right into it? And if she went to go look for the people she'd been missing for months she opened herself up to finding out that they were gone.

But she had to know.

Jane looked over at Ted and Karen. Every muscle in her body was tensing up and her mouth had gone dry. A small, scared, part of her mind screamed at her to stay inside where she was safe. But she had to put on her big girl pants and suck it up. "Is that okay?" she asked

Karen practically laughed. "Of course it's okay."

As the rest of the family went out to the car Nancy went upstairs to get Holly. When she came back downstairs she handed Jane a coat. The last time she'd been outside there was no need for one. But a cloudy day in November made her thankful for the offer.

The family headed out to the car but Jane hesitated on the front porch. Her eyes scanned the street in front of her, the one she had a perfect view of from the library and Mike's room. Families were emerging from their houses and chatting with neighbors on the pavement. Some wore wide smiles and hugged each other excitedly. Others wore somber expressions. It was clear from body language alone which people were the type she had been hiding from. As she stood on the porch the only person who seemed to notice her was a blonde woman across the street and four houses over. Over the shoulder of the man she was talking to she flashed Jane a soft smile.

She knew. Jane could tell.

She practically jumped out of her skin when Mike put his hand on her back. The worry in his expression was clear as day when she looked over at him. "I'm sorry." He said immediately. "Are you okay?"

Jane swallowed the small lump that had settled in her throat. "I'm just nervous." She admitted. Mike nodded, understanding completely, and held onto her hand as she walked to the car.

In the back seat she was sandwiched in between Mike and while Holly sat on her mother's lap. It had been months since she'd been in a car and she felt a big queasy but she forced herself to ignore it. Jane hardly bothered to hide the fact that she was a shaking nervous wreck. Mike held tightly onto her hand and Nancy glanced her way every few minutes. But Jane's eyes were fixed out the front windshield and didn't dare look anywhere else.

What if they were gone? All of them?

Ted somehow managed to find a parking spot somewhat close. The local junior high gymnasium doors were propped open and a long line ran all the way down the street. As they walked to the back Jane scanned the faces of those already on line. Everything she felt was perfectly mirrored on their faces. Including the glimmer of hope they all tried to suppress so they wouldn't get let down to hard. She loved the Wheelers with all her heart but they didn't understand the dread that rested so heavily on her shoulders she felt like she might collapse in the middle of the street. The only thing keeping her upright was Mike holding securely onto her arm.

When they finally reached the back of the line Jane had become so nervous she worried she might puke. No one said much. Every time she looked Mike's way he offered her his best attempt at an encouraging smile. But she could still see the hint of anxiety in his face. Jane had fallen for him dangerously hard and dizzyingly fast. She remembered how irritated she had been with him when she first moved in. Remembering made her feel like an idiot. Mostly everything she said or did to Mike before the day of the bombing made her feel like an idiot.

He had become the anchor that kept her sane. Everything seemed less big, bad, and scary when she was with Mike. Though she'd been furious at first she ended up being glad that he read her diary. After a while she didn't need to explain much to him. He had achieved his goal of understanding her better. Jane couldn't imagine how she would be able to function if she ever moved out and didn't have him by her side.

With only five people ahead of them in line she looked up at him. "I'm scared."

He squeezed her hand gently. "I know." Jane felt her heart do a backflip. What on earth had she done to deserve someone like him?

When it was finally her turn everything inside her begged her to turn around and run back to the car. Jane didn't think she could bare to hear anything other than good news. But she also knew that she would never forgive herself if she didn't find out what had happened

to him. Her knees shook as she approached the man sitting behind a table. In front of him sat a large stack of paper with four columns written on the top page. He was young, in his mid twenties maybe. His hair was dark and much too done up. Jane could see the gel from where she stood.

He looked up at her and, with the monotone voice of a man that had been repeating the same line for almost an hour, said "Name?"

For a moment Jane feared her voice would fail her. She cleared her throat and choked out "Jim Hopper."

The man flipped through papers for what felt like ten minutes. When he finally found the page he was looking for his finger ran down the list of names written down in the first column. "Hopper is in Bergen-Belsen." He read. "It's about an hour and a half's drive from here. That man back there can give you a map and some directions." He pointed at another table behind him on the other side of the room where a man was pointing at something on a piece of paper to show a couple in their sixties.

Jane looked back at the man in front of her. "And do you know if he's..."

The man's previously plain face twitched with sympathy. "I'm sorry." He answered, "I don't."

It's better than nothing. "I have two other names if that's okay?" Jane asked. Her voice came out weaker and shakier than she intended it to. The man nodded shortly. "Gwen Weber and Rita Scholz."

She watched him flip through the papers once more, this time twice as long as before. He eventually looked back up at her. "I don't have anything for either of those names." He told her. "But we're still getting information. If you come back in a day or two we'll definitely have more."

Jane barely choked out a thank you before heading straight over to the man with the maps. Two hours away. All that time and her father had only been two hours away from her.

Bergen-Belsen. The words felt weird in her mouth as she repeated them back to him. With a fat red marker he drew a line across the map and gave Ted more specific instructions on how to get there. As he talked Jane stood silently with her eyes fixed on the map. The fat red dot was so close to where he indicated they were. Once he was done they thanked him and headed back to the car. They passed by a few people who wore bright smiles. But they passed by more that were crying.

Just as they reached the car she felt Mike squeeze her hand gently. Nancy hesitated getting into the backseat when she saw them stop. "Are you okay to go there now?" he asked gently. "We can wait."

"I'm okay." She lied. It didn't matter how she felt. She needed to know.

Jane kept going back and forth between feeling everything and nothing at all. When tears built up in her eyes she did her best to keep them from falling. She made the mistake of wiping her eyes once which immediately got Mike and Nancy's attention. He put his arm around her shoulders and rubbed his hand in small circles on her arm while Nancy started digging around in her purse for tissues. More tears started falling when Nancy finally handed her the tissue. She did her best to be silent so Ted and Karen wouldn't notice too.

She loved them, the whole family, so much it made her heart ache. Not only did they manage to keep her safe for months but they made her feel like she was part of the family just as much as any of them. Anything she needed they jumped at the chance to help with. Whether it was talking about what was on her mind or just the opposite they were ready to listen. Jane didn't know what she would do with herself if her father wanted to find another house close to the city. Could she handle living three hours away from them? From Mike?

Jane knew they were getting close before she saw the entrance. The area got more and more isolated the farther they drove. Eventually military cars with different countries flags on the side started appearing on the side of the road. Jane was able to spot the entrance from about a quarter mile away. A fence with barbed wire on top stood almost ten feet tall. A large sign stuck out of the ground next to

the open gate.

Bergen-Belsen.

Ted parked the car in the first spot he could get. Both sides of the roads were jam packed with cars of who she assumed were families looking for their loved ones. Once the car was in park everyone looked over at Jane, waiting to hear she was okay to get out. Her eyes were glued on the sign out front. Her father was in there somewhere. The only question was whether he was going to be coming back with them. Jane hadn't realized until they were parked outside that there was no room for him in the car. Was that a bad sign or some kind of preminiton?

She took in a shaky breath and looked over at Mike. It didn't surprise her that he was already watching her carefully. "I'm ready."

Everyone opened the doors and climbed out of the car. Jane only took a few steps before Mike stopped and tugged on her hand. The rest of the family went ahead without noticing that the two had stopped. When she looked over at him his eyes frantically searched her face. He grabbed onto her other hand before speaking. "Are you absolutely sure you're okay with this?" Mike asked her. "If you find something out... it's not something you'll be able to un-know."

"I know." Her voice sounded as shaky as her whole body felt. "But I need to know."

Mike squeezed her hands gently. "Yeah, I know." He said. His eyes quickly fell down to their hands before meeting hers again. Her heart twisted into a knot when she saw something she couldn't quite name in her eyes. "I'm just... worried."

Jane could feel herself starting to tear up. She had absolutely no idea what she would have done over the past couple of months if it hadn't been for Mike. Sometimes she felt like she was drowning in the world. Mike was always able to pull her back to the surface. Even before the bombing. He had held her and made her smile even after she'd gotten cross with him for a stupid reason. In hindsight she realized that having someone that cared for her had terrified her. He was just another person she could lose. Mike had become a vital part

of her life she didn't think she could live without.

Jane was in love with him. Totally and hopelessly. She had just been too afraid to admit it to herself.

"It's okay." She told him and did her best to smile. "It's going to be fine, remember?"

Mike bent down just enough to kiss her on the forehead. "It will be fine." He said as he wrapped his arm around her waist. "I'll be here for you no matter what."

She wanted to tell him. The words danced on the edge of her tongue like a diver on a board. But she didn't think, on top of everything that was going on, that she could handle a rejection.

Jane clung to his arm as they caught up with the family. As they walked into the camp they passed by people crying and hugging one another. They also passed by soldiers sitting with people in blankets with bowls of watered down soup in their laps. Jane had always thought that zombies were fictional. But the people in the camp were dead men walking. They were thinner than Mike (which she hadn't thought possible) and had skin that was paper white. Sunken eyes and small wounds were present to a certain degree on almost every face she looked in.

Jane's eyes frantically searched through the crowd that surrounded them. There must have been hundreds of people inside the camp. Soldiers, prisoners, and loved ones. Her stomach clenched when she saw a young boy younger than Holly who looked as if he could fall apart into a pile of bones at any moment.

Where the hell is he?

The deeper they walked into the camp the more panicked she began to feel. She felt like her own heartbeat was choking her. What if she didn't recognize him and left without him? What if he didn't recognize her? What if he was in one of the body bags the soldiers had attempted to hide in the back corner of the courtyard?

Where the hell is he?

Desperation was starting to take control of her. The only time she dared to let go of Mike was to approach a man that was just about to pass them. He was so thin she was glad there was no wind because it might have knocked him over.

"Excuse me." She managed to choke out when she stopped him. "Do you know if there's a Jim Hopper here?"

He replied in a language she knew just enough of to recognize as Polish before walking away. Her bottom lip started to tremble as she turned back to the Wheelers. Mike immediately came over to her and put his arm back around her. "I don't think I can do this." She whispered just loud enough for him to hear.

"Let's take a break, okay?" he said. "Just look at me and breathe for a second."

She did as she told him and looked up at him. He took in and let out dramatic breaths for her to follow which made her smile a little bit. The rest of the family stood close by waiting for her to be ready to continue. For once they didn't stare at her nervously while they waited to see if she would be okay. They stared at the scene around them in disbelief. Her mind refused to believe that her father, her hero, had been kept in a place as awful as Bergen-Belsen. Mike put his hands on her cheeks, "Just breathe, Jane." He told her.

"Jane?"

She could feel her heart jumping into her throat. It was a voice she could recognize anywhere. The same voice that had given her advice about bullies and boys and general socializing ever since the fifth grade. She turned her head in the direction she'd heard the voice and her eyes almost immediately landed on the source. The girl that she looked back at her was a dull and subdued version of the one she knew. Her hair, which had always been cut to reach her waist, was just about as long as Jane's was. Her once rosy cheeks were pale and lifeless looking. She was dressed in the same grey uniform as everyone else. The only thing that was the same was her eyes as blue as the sky that sparkled mischievously at her.

It was her Gwen.

She only noticed the man sitting beside her when he stood up. The second her eyes landed on his face she let out a sob and clapped her hand over her mouth. His once clean-shaven face now had a beard that reached halfway down his neck and dark circles almost an entire inch underneath his eyes. They were so dark she wondered for a second if he had gotten punched. When she was little he had been so strong that she could sit on his arm when he held it out straight. Now he was thin and weak looking. But there was no mistaking him when a familiar smile spread on his face.

"Daddy?"

He took only two steps forward before she broke out of her trance and ran full speed towards them. Tears were streaming down her face before she even reached him. She crashed into him so hard that he stumbled backwards but he managed to catch himself. His arms wrapped around her in a bone crushing hug. If it hadn't been clear just by looking at him that he had lost a lot of his strength she could just feel how skinny he had gotten. But none of it mattered. He was her dad. He was *there*.

She could feel his cheek resting on the top of her head. "God, Janey I'm so happy you're okay." He said. His voice was raspier than she remembered. She wondered if it was a reflection of her memory or his time the camp.

Jane pulled away just enough to look up at him and wipe the tears off her face. "Says you." She replied. "I've been worried sick about you for months." She then looked over at Gwen. Tears were running down her dirty and pale face but her smile was still as bright as her eyes. "Both of you."

Gwen wrapped her arms around Jane's neck. She was the only person her age she knew that was shorter than she was. "I didn't recognize you standing next to a boy." She said into her ear, hushed so her father wouldn't hear. "I thought I was hallucinating."

Jane let out a laugh. Typical Gwen, always able to pick things up as if they'd been apart only a day or two. She squeezed her tightly before looking at her. "He's a senior." Jane told her. She grinned ear to ear as she watched Gwen's eyes snap up to look at Mike over her shoulder.

Her smile grew even wider as she stared at him a few yards behind her. "Are you going to introduce me?" she asked when she finally looked back at her.

"Only if you promise to back off."

Jane was happily sandwiched between them as they walked the short distance over to the Wheelers. The whole family was all beaming back at her. She felt like she weighed nothing with the worry of her fathers and friends fate decided and known. If she weren't holding on so tightly to them she would have floated up into the sky and lived among the clouds for the rest of her days. Happy tears were running down her face but she made no attempt to wipe them away. She kept glancing at each of them to make sure they were really there. They were *really there*.

When the three of them reached them Jane could feel her face starting to ache from smiling so much. All the times she wished that her dad could meet Ted and Karen and that Gwen would tease her about Mike were finally happening. If she hadn't exclusively been having nightmares every time she slept for months she would have thought she was dreaming. "Dad, Gwen, these are the Wheelers." They were words she didn't think she would be able to say. "They've been letting me stay with them for the past couple of months."

Her dad shook hands with both Ted and Karen. "Thank you so much for taking care of my girl." He said. Jane could hear the tears he was trying to hold back in his voice. "There has to be some way I can repay you, please."

"There's no need." Ted answered almost immediately. "Jane was an absolute pleasure to have. We would do it again in a heartbeat."

Jane hadn't thought she could smile any wider. She was quickly proved wrong. Her eyes drifted down to Holly who was still staring at the camp with a horrified look. She reached for her hand to get her attention. "Hey Holly," she said when her big blue eyes looked up at her, "Remember my friend Gwen I told you about? The one with the pretty blonde hair like you?"

Holly's eyes drifted over to her friend standing next to her and went

even wider. She gently pulled on Jane's hand to get her to kneel down to her height. Once she did Holly leaned in and said in her ear "She's pretty."

Jane put her hand next to her mouth so no one could read her lips. It was what Holly always did when she wanted to tell a secret. Even if she didn't exactly understand the concept of whispering. "I know." She said back. Still holding onto Holly's hand, she stood up straight again and looked over at Gwen. "And this is Mike and Nancy."

Gwen shook hands with Nancy and shot Jane a quick look before doing the same with Mike. Somehow, in plain grey clothes and dull pale skin she was still beautiful. If she hadn't been through hell Jane might have been jealous of her. "I bet if Jane could she would have told me all about you." She told him.

He laughed and looked between the two. "Well she's definitely told me a lot about you."

Gwen grinned and bumped her shoulder against Jane's. "Yeah, I would hope so."

They didn't stay in the camp for very long. Jane imagined that Gwen and her father were eager to leave. She'd only been there for ten minutes and she was already looking forward to leaving. Her arms were linked with them both as they headed for the entrance. Just as they reached the open gate Gwen stopped dead in her tracks. When Jane looked over at her she was staring wide eyed at the ground. Jane recognized the same fear she had felt that afternoon when she left the house for the first time. Only ten times worse.

"Hey." She said gently and grabbed her hand. "It's okay. You're coming with us."

Gwen stared at the ground for a few seconds longer. Her wide eyes held pure fear. Jane's father reached around her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Gwen." He said. She tore her eyes away from the ground to look up at him. "They can't hurt you anymore, right?"

While she waited for her friend to respond Jane's eyes scanned her face more thoroughly than before. Her heart ached at the sight of a

fading bruise on her cheekbone. Gwen's frightened expression didn't last much longer before her smile returned. In a moment she was her old self again.

Jane was sure she had just caught a glimpse of what life was like inside the camp. It made her sick to her stomach so she did what she was best at; changing the subject. She told both of them about all the books she had read at the Wheelers because it was the easiest thing she could think to talk about. When she told them about how Mike made fun of her for liking *Gone with the Wind* Gwen shot him a joking glare over her shoulder and whispered "I don't think I like him anymore."

When they reached the car Jane, her dad, and Gwen sat on the floor behind the back seat. It wasn't the comfiest spot but she didn't care. She just wanted to be with them. Just as the car pulled back out onto the road she spotted black blocky writing on her dad's forearm. *BB-4559*. Jane glanced over at Gwen to find the same handwriting on her arm. *BB-6893*. She felt a wave of nausea come over her not only at the fact that two of the most imported people in the world to her had been branded but that there were four thousand people in the camp that came before them. There had been a lot of people there when Jane arrived but there were *not* six thousand. She could easily guess what happened to the others that were no longer there.

"I don't think I've ever seen your hair so short." Jane commented as they drove away from the camp. She couldn't stand the way they looked out the window at the open gate and needed to talk about something more lighthearted.

Gwen flashed her a small smile. "They caught me saving up food. They slapped me around a bit and then cut my hair in front of the whole camp. Their idea of a punishment." She shrugged her shoulders. "Joke's on them. I love it."

She was putting on a brave face and they all knew it. No one mentioned it.

They asked her a thousand questions about what she had done since she last saw them. It was clear that they didn't want to talk about what they had been up to, which was fine with her. Jane told them

how she had learned to cook and promised them that she was going to make them something. She told them about how she had suddenly acquired the ability to talk to kids and how during the air raid she had gone back into the house for Holly.

"That was really dangerous, Jane." Her father said. "You shouldn't put yourself in danger like that."

She forced herself to not roll her eyes. "Yeah, dad, I know. I already got the lecture."

Jane talked the whole drive back to the house. She couldn't stop. Though neither of them said anything Mike and Nancy were obviously listening to every word they said. The wide smiles they both wore were infectious.

By the time they pulled into the driveway her throat had gone sore but she didn't care one bit. The only thing that mattered was that they were okay.

They were okay.

15. Epilogue

Sorry for the delay in upload but I just really don't like this chapter and have been trying to improve it because this story deserves the best ending I can make. but I also feel like I've been owing you guys this chapter for awhile so here it is!

January 7th 1946.

"I still can't believe you have a boyfriend."

"You've known for two months."

"I know but still."

The old nursery of the Wheeler's house had been completely redone and turned into a bedroom that Jane and Gwen now shared. Two beds, dressers, and desks had been managed to squeeze into the little room. It was within weeks of taking her home they learned that Gwen's parents had been killed. She'd gotten separated from them and taken to another camp due to overcrowding and they'd died sometime after she left. Gwen was much better at dealing with and hiding her emotions around others. But it wasn't often that Jane woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of her best friend crying.

About a week after they heard the news about Gwen's parents they got a letter from Rita's family. They told her that they'd been in a camp called Auschwitz and that both Rita and her little sister had died back in July. They'd both fallen ill and had been killed by the soldiers who ran the camp.

Things were so much easier with her dad and Gwen back, but they were still hard. Everyone was just taking things one day at a time.

Jane could hear her dad's voice from down the hall in the room that he was staying in. "Girls, it's already 7:30 you're going to be late!"

Gwen groaned and pushed her chair out from her desk on the opposite side of the room. "Guess I'm not gonna do my hair today."

She said as she grabbed her jacket from the closet.

Jane, who was already waiting by the door, rolled her eyes. "I think you'll survive."

The two girls hurried down the stairs and down into the dining room. The glow Gwen had lacked had finally returned and her dad had started gaining the weight back (he'd also trimmed his beard the day they got home and had gone back to his regular shaving schedule). Gwen was thrilled about her new wardrobe she had gotten when the three of them went out shopping shortly after they got home. She was thrilled about the maroon blouse with puffed sleeves which had been hanging up in the closet since the day she bought it for a special occasion.

The night that her dad and Gwen had been brought back they had soup and rolls for dinner. Her dad had to break the news that they'd been so underfed he was pretty sure it would be a while before they could stomach solid food again. She and Nancy made the best chicken soup they could and even watered it down a little but Jane still found her dad throwing up in the bathroom about an hour later.

In the middle of the meal Ted and Karen said that they'd been talking about what would happen when the war ended. They said that the three of them were welcome to stay as long as they wanted and that they would gladly change the nursery and Ted's office into bedrooms. Needless to say they took their offer in a heartbeat.

The feeling of not having to worry about going outside was liberating in a way Jane had never imagined. Whenever she wanted to she could step out the front door and just breathe the fresh air. She did so often.

The two girls were met with the smell of pancakes before they even made it to the dining room. The Wheelers had bought a dining table long enough to comfortably fit everyone but Jane still sat in the same spot next to Mike. Only now Gwen sat on her other side. When they sat down her blonde friend piled strawberries onto her plate with a large grin. It was the first solid food she'd managed to keep down. She eyed the plate of pancakes for a second before glancing nervously at Jane.

"Will you share one with me?" she asked

"Of course."

Jane cut two even pieces and placed one on Gwen's plate next to her before getting another full one for herself. Underneath the table Mike reached for her hand. Despite the fact that his parents revealed they'd known the two were together for almost the entire time, and that her dad figured it out pretty much instantly, they still felt embarrassed around their family.

"Are you nervous?" he asked her once she swallowed the first piece of pancake she cut.

"Yes." She answered honestly.

Mike's school had started building an additional wing specifically for students whose schooling had been set back due to the war in the beginning of December. It would be Jane's first day of school since she was fifteen. Of course she was nervous. Not to mention it was an entirely different school than she was used to, one that was filled with strangers.

"Dustin said that we can all come over school." Mike told her. "Do you guys wanna go or do you wanna come right home?"

Jane glanced over at Gwen who looked up from her plate. After a few seconds hesitation she raised an eyebrow. "I'll go if you go?"

She nodded, "Yeah, okay."

Slowly but surely Jane was beginning to get over the anxiety that came whenever she left the house. At first she was only able to be outside for about twenty minutes before she started having a panic attack. Every day they practiced going out for longer periods of time. In the beginning she and Mike would just take a ride around the neighborhood. Then they would go get lunch. Eventually she was able to stay out long enough to go see a movie.

For New Year's Mike's friend Will had invited the three of them to a small party at his house. All of his friends had come over to meet Jane and Gwen (apparently Mike had been talking about them

nonstop since the day the war ended) so she had already known she would be with good company. She just wondered if she would be able to stay out past midnight. Mike stayed by her side the whole night and every hour or so checked in to make sure she was okay. Surprisingly she had been fine the whole night.

Jane's dad came down only a few minutes after she did and sat on the other side of Gwen. He too didn't fill his plate up much. She remembered how he used to eat twice as much as her for dinner in the same amount of time. Though it hurt to see so many little things that were different about them she told herself that it might take time but they would get back to normal. But the tattoos were something she would never get used to. Most days Gwen covered it up with makeup but when Jane glanced over she saw that, with her short sleeves, her tattoo was on display.

She leaned in close to her. "You didn't cover it today?" she asked quietly so no one else would hear.

Gwen followed her gaze down to her arm before shrugging her shoulders. "I don't know." She answered. "I don't think I'm going to anymore. It's not something to be embarrassed about."

Hearing those words come from Gwen, who once in the eighth grade didn't come to school one day because she had a cold sore, was a shock to the system. Jane put her arm on her shoulder. "I'm so proud of you."

She watched her roll her eyes. "Please don't get all mushy on me, today, I don't think I can handle it."

I don't think I can handle it. It was a sentence that had been said many times in the Wheeler house.

Once they were done with breakfast and cleaned up their plates they headed for the front door to get their backpacks and jackets. Jane groaned as she put her arms through the sleeves. "I left my bad upstairs, I'll be right back." She said before turning and taking the stairs two at a time.

Up in her room Jane triple checked that she packed everything she

needed. She also put Gwen's makeup in the front pocket just in case she changed her mind and got self conscious about the tattoo. Just as she zipped it up she heard a soft knock on the open door behind her. She glanced over her shoulder and instantly spotted Mike standing in the doorway.

A smile spread on her face as he started walking over to her. "Hey, whatcha doing up here?" she asked

Mike shrugged. "I just wanted to check on you." He said. "Today's a big day, I want to make sure you're okay."

"I'm okay." She told him. He was constantly checking on her but she had yet to get tired of it. But Mike wasn't the only one either. Everyone was always asking her if she was okay or if she needed anything. Even Holly would bring home drawings for her from school when she thought Jane was having a bad morning. She was so incredibly lucky to have them all that it blew her mind. "You don't have to worry, okay? It's just school. I'll be fine."

He wrapped his arms around her waist. "Yeah, I know." He said, but Jane wasn't quite convinced. "But you haven't been out of the house that long yet. What if you get freaked out?"

Jane put her arms around his neck. "Then I'll take to Gwen. Take deep breaths. All that stuff I've been practicing. I'll be fine."

Mike flashed her a smile. "I know." He said before leaning down and kissing her forehead. "It's my job to worry."

Before he could stand up straight again she stood on her toes and pressed her lips against his. She had yet to get tired of kissing and she didn't think she ever would. Everything that attracted the other girls in school to boys and dating had become clear back in August. Jane no longer had to wonder what was wrong with her that made her so uninterested in the idea. She had started to question if she ever would be interested. Now she knew it was just a matter of finding the right boy.

Mike needed another haircut. She could tell by the way her hand on the back of his neck was just brushed by the ends of his hair. A small

smile appeared on her face when she remembered how terrified she had been the last time she cut his hair. Back when she didn't dare to let herself admit her own feelings to herself. The difference between then and now were astonishing.

Her first day of school had given her a small burst of confidence. "Mike?"

"Hm?"

"I love you."

He stood up straight again while his eyes frantically searched her face. Jane began to worry as he remained silent. Had she said it too soon? Had she totally messed things up the way she had been worried about doing for months? She wished she would have consulted with Gwen beforehand to get her opinion on the timing.

Before she could worry too much a smile, bigger than she had ever seen him put on, completely took over his face. Mike pulled her into a tight hug and buried his head into her neck. He didn't need to say it back. Just by his reaction she could tell what he was thinking. Jane had never been good at reading people's body language, but the more time she spent with Mike the easier it got to read him. She mentioned it to him once a few weeks back. He had told her he could either read her like a book or not at all. Seemed about right.

"I love you too." His voice was muffled slightly but she could still hear him loud and clear.

Jane wished they could stay like that forever. But it was only about a minute before she heard Gwen's voice from the first floor yelling up at them. "Hey lovebirds!" she shouted, "Unless you want me stealing the keys and leaving without you I suggest you haul ass down here!"

She groaned as she let her arms drop to her sides before she trudged out the door and down the stairs with Mike close behind. As confident as she was that she would get through the day Jane just wasn't sure how easy it would be. How many times would she feel the tightness clenching in her chest and creeping up her throat? How often would she have to blink back tears or excuse herself to go to

the bathroom when she couldn't hold them back any longer? Jane tried to push the thought down and instead reached for Mike's hand.

When they finally reached the first floor again Gwen was standing in the open front doorway with her backpack on and her hands on her hips. She tossed Mike his keys once he got close enough and lead the way out to the car. He shot Jane a grin as they followed her out. Gwen climbed into the backseat while Jane sat up in the front next to Mike. As they pulled out of the driveway she leaned up to the front and turned on the radio.

"You excited for first day of school, Janey?" she said and pinched her cheeks.

Jane swatted her hand away. "Not as excited as you." She told her. "We're going to school. You've never been so enthusiastic about learning before in your life."

Gwen shrugged her shoulders. "I just want things to be normal again. Even if it means suffering through algebra." She said. "Besides, I haven't had a cute boy to flirt with in *months*. I've been completely deprived."

Both her and Mike laughed. "I kind of forgot how annoying you were when I was busy missing you." Jane teased.

She felt Gwen give her shoulder a light shrug. "I thought you missed me *because* I was so annoying."

The drive to school from Mike's house was longer than the walk to her old school had been. She and Gwen went back and forth playfully while Mike simply smiled and shook his head at them. Everything was so unbelievably normal. In some ways it was even better than it had been before. Even though Jane had lost so much during the war she had also gained so much.

When they finally pulled up to the school she stared up at the building. She felt the same blend of excitement and nervousness as she had her first day of school back when she was five years old. Students were filing in through the front doors but Jane was hesitant to even get out of the car. She only tore her eyes away from the

school when she felt Mike put a hand on her shoulder.

"Ready?" he asked gently. From the backseat she could feel Gwen watching her carefully.

Before moving in with the Wheelers she felt like there was no point in fighting so hard. She'd lost everything that she cared about. What was the point in trying so hard to survive the war when there was nothing to look forward to when it was over? But now, on the other side of what felt like the end of the world, she felt stronger than ever. And when Mike smiled at her like she was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen she felt like she could conquer the world.

"Ready." She answered as she reached for the door handle.

I know this was a bit anticlimactic but I feel like they all deserve a bit of normalcy after everything they've been through. I hope you liked this (shitty) ending to this story. Hopefully I'll see you guys in the comments of my other stories :)

16. authors note

hello, its been a minute.

so I was reading this story over again so I could re write it for a writing class of mine and I suddenly have so much muse for this plot all over again and I was wondering if you guys would be interested in me re doing this story and making it better and longer.

all of the chapters already done would be included but I would also add in some more. maybe some flashback chapters and more in mike's POV. idk I don't have too many ideas just because I'm not sure if anyone would be interested.

please leave a review or PM me if you would be interested in a rewrite and leave me some suggestions on how to make it better!